

# The Way of Improvement Leads Home: Philip Vickers Fithian's Rural Enlightenment

John Fea

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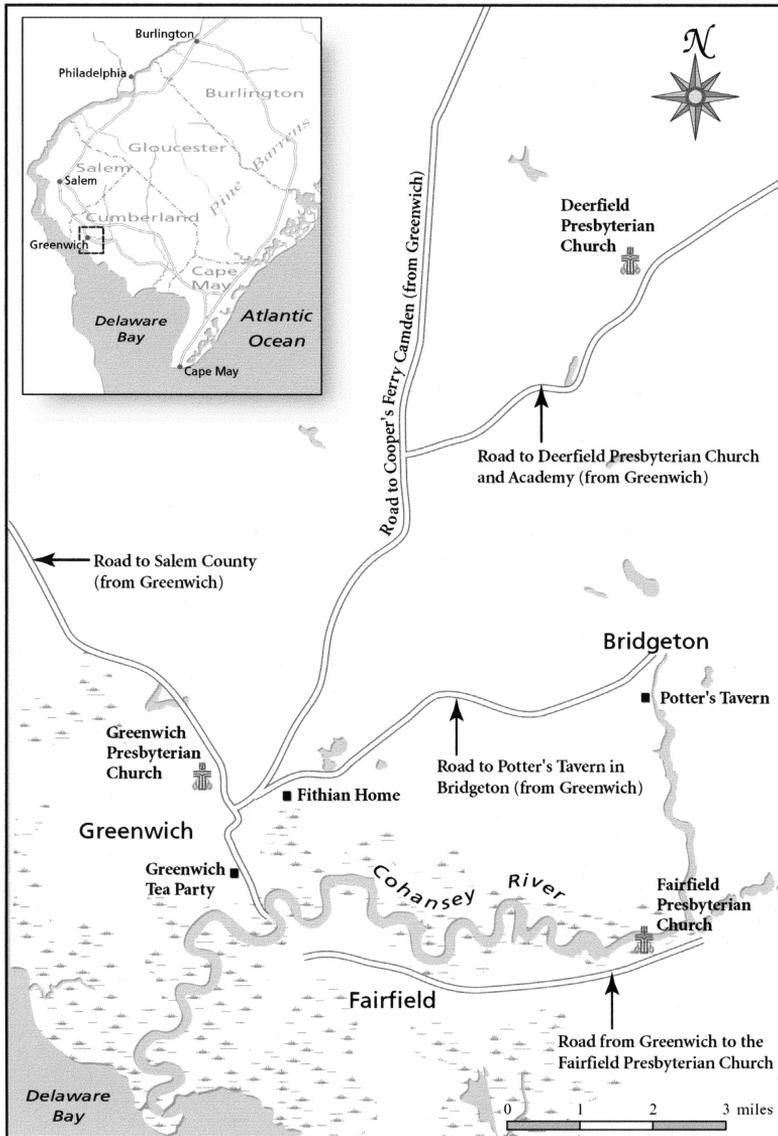
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On the morning of Friday, July 16, 1773, Philip Vickers Fithian awoke early and traveled from his Greenwich, New Jersey, house across the Cohansey River to Fairfield, where he spent several days with William Hollingshead, who would soon be installed as minister of the Fairfield Presbyterian Church. There they dined, drank tea, supped, and exchanged the "Usual Civilities" with friends and relations. The friends passed their time together conversing on topics including "the state of Affairs in Philadelphia," Fithian's candidacy for Presbyterian ordination, Hollingshead's upcoming sermon entitled "States of Man," and the "useful and well-chosen books" in the minister's library. Fithian and Hollingshead ate breakfast on Monday with Jonathan Elmer, their representative in the New Jersey assembly. Later that day this gregarious duo traveled back to Greenwich, where Fithian observed a "long confabulation" between Hollingshead and Andrew Hunter, minister of the Greenwich Presbyterian Church, on the subject of "whether there is Scripture Authority for Diocesan Bishops." Here they also encountered Richard Howell, one of Fithian's former classmates at the local Presbyterian academy, who shared with them news of his legal studies in New Castle, Delaware. Fithian lamented that although Howell was a "young Gentleman of considerable Genius, & had made good proficiency in his Studies," he was "remarkably profane in his Principles, & Loose in his Behav-

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The social world of Philip Vickers Fithian, c. 1770. Fithian's life in the rural southern New Jersey region of Cohansey was defined significantly by his regular visits to the area's three Presbyterian churches at Deerfield, Greenwich, and Fairfield. *Map by Gerry Craig.*

our!" After calling on several more friends, Philip returned home late Monday afternoon, "Drank Tea with several Neighbors," and "Went to bed about ten."<sup>1</sup>

By examining Fithian's journal over this four-day period, one can learn much about what the young Presbyterian deemed important. His entries reveal the musings of an

<sup>1</sup> Journal of Philip Vickers Fithian, July 16–19, 1773, Papers of Philip Vickers Fithian (microfilm) (Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Princeton, N.J.).

educated candidate for the Presbyterian ministry. The encounter with Richard Howell demonstrates his concern about personal morality and proper behavior. His breakfast with Elmer suggests an interest in political matters. Reflections on books and philosophy and discussions of current news from Philadelphia invoke a cosmopolitan spirit in the rural confines of "Cohansey"—a series of small townships in southern New Jersey situated approximately forty-five miles southwest of Philadelphia.

Fithian's activities illustrate his attempt to rise above the parochialism and rusticity of the Jersey countryside to be a "citizen of the world." By the middle of the eighteenth century, the inhabitants of the British North American colonies had become exposed at an ever-increasing rate to the new learning emanating from such cultural and intellectual centers as London, Edinburgh, and Glasgow. Networks of communication and trade allowed such ideas to reach remote corners of the American provinces and connected even the most ordinary farming communities to the world of the British Enlightenment.<sup>2</sup> From the villages of Cohansey, Fithian was able to participate indirectly in the eighteenth-century republic of letters—a transatlantic community of scholars sustained through sociability, print, and the pursuit of mutual improvement. Though abstract and boundless, the Enlightenment ideals forged by the republic of letters could indeed shape the "thoughts and deeds" of the republic's members.<sup>3</sup>

The republic of letters was above all else a rational republic, with little tolerance for those unable to rid themselves of parochial passions. Participation required a commitment to self-improvement that demanded a belief in the Enlightenment values of human potential and societal progress. The best citizens of the republic maintained primary loyalty, not to family, friends, faith, or land, but to an international commonwealth of humankind. Not all its members could frequent the coffeehouses, clubs, and salons of Paris and London, but they could still think and feel beyond the bounds of their local attachments. They could make choices with their lives that ultimately carried them—geographically or in imagination—away from home. As the historian Gordon Wood has aptly put it, "local feelings were common to peasants and backward peoples, but educated gentlemen were supposed to be at home anywhere." To be too wedded to local attachments was "a symptom of narrow-mindedness, and indeed of disease."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Ned Landsman, *From Colonials to Provincials: American Thought and Culture, 1680–1760* (Ithaca, 2000); Ian Steele, *The English Atlantic, 1675–1740: An Exploration of Communications and Community* (New York, 1986); Norman S. Fiering, "The Transatlantic Republic of Letters: A Note on the Circulation of Learned Periodicals to Early Eighteenth-Century America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 33 (Oct. 1976), 642–60; Michael Warner, *Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990); and Richard Brown, *Knowledge Is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America* (New York, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> Fiering, "Transatlantic Republic of Letters"; Lorraine Daston, "The Ideal and Reality of the Republic of Letters in the Enlightenment," *Science in Context*, 4 (Winter 1991), 367; Landsman, *From Colonials to Provincials*, 31–56.

<sup>4</sup> Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York, 1992), 221. On eighteenth-century cosmopolitanism, see Thomas J. Schlereth, *The Cosmopolitan Ideal in Enlightenment Thought: Its Form and Function in the Ideas of Franklin, Hume, and Voltaire, 1694–1790* (Notre Dame, 1977); Ian Dyck, "Local Attachments, National Identities, and World Citizenship in the Thought of Thomas Paine," *History Workshop Journal*, 35 (Autumn 1993), 117–35; and Alan D. McKillop, "Local Attachment and Cosmopolitanism—The Eighteenth Century Pattern," in *From Sensibility to Romanticism: Essays Presented to Frederick A. Pottle*, ed. Frederick W. Hilles

In the messiness of everyday life, however, the cosmopolitan ideal was often impractical. It demanded a life-style that only a handful of elite intellectuals could attain. Max Hilbert Boehm, writing in 1932, reminded us that cosmopolitanism has always existed in “compromise with nationalism, race consciousness, professional interests, caste feeling, family, and even egotism.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, although Fithian sought to partake in a cosmopolitan fellowship of learning and letters that oriented his mental and social worlds away from the place of his birth, the long mid-July weekend of 1773 could just as easily be interpreted through the lens of localism. Long-standing personal relationships, communities of faith, and a sense of social obligation to the men and women who inhabited the soil where he was raised often provided the context for enlightened conversation. Jonathan Elmer, for example, was a close family friend. Andrew Hunter was the clergyman who had baptized Fithian as an infant, catechized him as a young boy, and encouraged him to pursue a career in the ministry. In fact, all the people Fithian spent time with that weekend were Presbyterians affiliated with the religious community that gave meaning to life in Cohansey.

No one was more aware of the tensions between cosmopolitanism and local attachment than Fithian himself. The need to reconcile the pursuit of Enlightenment self-improvement with a passion and love for home was perhaps the greatest moral problem facing the newly educated sons of British American farmers. Fithian learned quickly that his pursuit of a life of learning, a vocation in the educated ministry, and a call to serve his new country would require a degree of detachment from friends, family, and the very soil of his homeland. Yet Fithian's cosmopolitan turn is incomprehensible apart from those social connections. His short life reveals the need for the local as the anchor of a modern and revolutionary self in the eighteenth century. It was Cohansey that continued to hold Fithian's primary affection and that shaped—and transformed—all that he learned beyond its bounds. As a child of the American Enlightenment, Fithian could rely on an intellectual, religious, and social scaffolding that enabled him to live a life worthy of a man of letters and yet benefit from the virtues of his local attachments. As a patriot, he could combine support for a highly cosmopolitan revolutionary ideology with the intensive Presbyterian view of everyday life that permeated Cohansey culture. Ultimately, he confronted the task of finding how best to adapt to the social consequences of the modern quest for self-improvement. The result was a cosmopolitan rootedness that, in the context of Fithian's agrarian upbringing, I have called his “rural Enlightenment.”<sup>6</sup>

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and Harold Bloom (Oxford, 1965). For recent theoretical works on this ideal, see Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins, eds., *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation* (Minneapolis, 1998); and Martha C. Nussbaum et al., *For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism* (Boston, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Max Hilbert Boehm, “Cosmopolitanism,” quoted in Schlereth, *Cosmopolitan Ideal in Enlightenment Thought*, xiii.

<sup>6</sup> This account differs from other analyses of the impact of the Enlightenment in rural early America, particularly David Jaffee's important study of New England's “village Enlightenment.” Jaffee's “village Enlightenment” was bound up with “the formation of a market for cultural commodities in printed form.” Though Cohansey's connection to Philadelphia markets made news, ideas, and printed matter available to Fithian, his Enlightenment was grounded less in a newly emerged print infrastructure connecting hinterland to metropolis and more in the rhythms of sociability and moral and religious life of agricultural society in the Delaware Valley. Since the late seventeenth century, southern New Jersey had been linked to Philadelphia (and, by extension, the West Indies and the British Atlantic) through the grain and livestock trade. Nor was it a newly settled frontier. Thus *new* access to

Philip Vickers Fithian was born in 1747 on the banks of the Cohansey River in Cumberland County, New Jersey. He was raised in the small village of Greenwich, but his social world included all of “Cohansie,” the cluster of rural townships surrounding the river. Cohansey was an agricultural community of small middling farmers who produced grain, cattle, and timber for Philadelphia markets. In 1772 most of the county’s nearly five thousand inhabitants resided in its towns. Fithian described his home as a “Spartan Common-Wealth” where the “midling or lower Class are accounted the strength & Honour of the Colony.”<sup>7</sup> He spent his childhood as any Cohansey son might—working on his family’s farm and participating in the social rituals of agricultural life. Most of his mornings were devoted to jobs from reaping and sowing to making cider and repairing damaged sluices. Cohansians were bound together by the ownership of land and a common culture informed by the rhythms of the agricultural season. Days were spent behind the plow, nights were spent visiting, exchanging news or gossip, and sipping tea. During harvest season, Philip performed the arduous task of reaping hay and wheat, both for his own family and for several neighbors. After the workday was done, he could be found conversing with friends, visiting the elderly, admiring agricultural wonders such as the slaughter of a thousand-pound ox at a nearby farm, and, at least once, serenading “several houses” in and around Greenwich.<sup>8</sup> Fithian maintained his abiding interest in the social history of his homeland by meticulously recording genealogical data about individual

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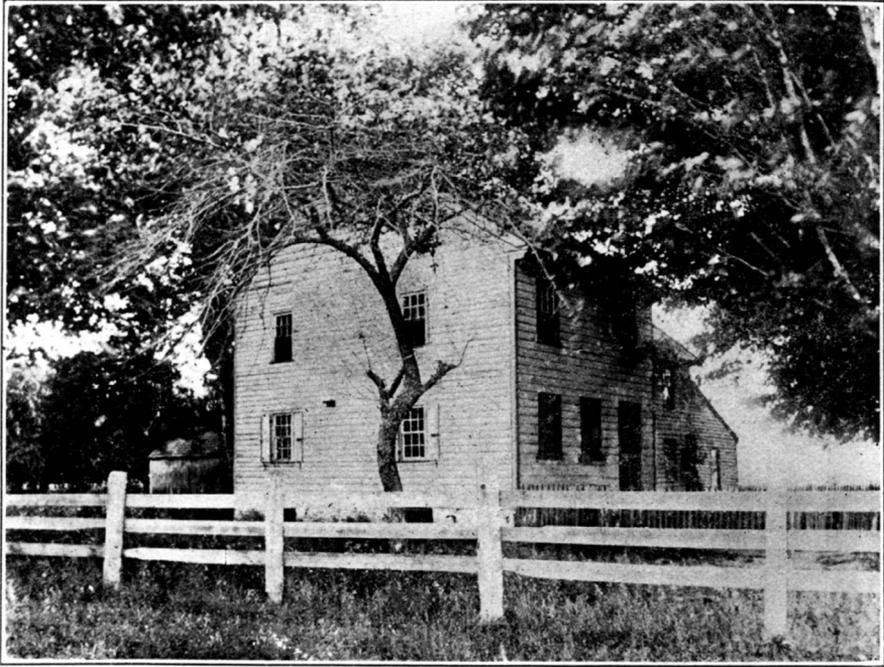
markets did not precipitate the spread of Enlightenment ideals into the region. Jaffee’s “village Enlightenment” signified the “erosion of a hierarchical structure of authority, in which cultural controls were held by a clerical or college-trained elite.” It fit with the democratic spirit of the *post*-revolutionary age. Fithian’s “rural Enlightenment,” however, was “colonial,” rooted in clerical authority, and disseminated by educated ministers intent on bringing moral improvement to their countryside churches.

Those who experienced Jaffee’s “village Enlightenment” were “self-made men”—Franklinesque models of an individualism that thrived on the frontiers of the early republic. Fithian, however, was a product of a long-standing community defined by religious faith and a commitment to a specific place and soil. The “village Enlightenment” is a story of how the unlimited possibilities available to frontier New Englanders affected their ability to rise socially and to pursue refined commodities and new (printed) ideas. The market, Jaffee emphasized, allowed these men to look beyond the localism of their villages. We learn very little from Jaffee about the social and cultural worlds lost as a consequence of such an Enlightenment and how his characters dealt with the life choices that stemmed from that loss.

In contrast, my examination of Fithian’s “rural Enlightenment” tends to collapse the much-celebrated opposition of cosmopolitan and local. The question that dominated Fithian’s life was how to be “enlightened” *and* at home in Cohansey. He strove to create a modern self within what Jaffee described as a “culture of the [colonial] countryside” that “was stable, traditional, and conservative, sustained by the interlocking institutions of family, church, school, and town government.” Before the Revolution, it was mainly in such places—not usually thought of as havens of intellectual and social improvement when compared to urban clubs, salons, and coffeehouses—that Americans could live the Enlightenment. See David Jaffee, “The Village Enlightenment in New England, 1760–1820,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 47 (July 1990), 327–46, esp. 328, 329, 300; and David Jaffee, *People of the Wachusett: Greater New England in History and Memory, 1630–1860* (Ithaca, 1999), 200–238.

<sup>7</sup> The only biography of Fithian is Vincent Stanley McCluskey, “The Life and Times of Philip Vickers Fithian: Revolutionary War Hero” (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1991). For census data, see “An Account of the Dwelling Houses and Inhabitants of . . . the said Province of New Jersey . . . from the 1st of July, 1771 to the 1st of July, 1772,” in *Documents Relating to the Colonial, Revolutionary and Post Revolutionary History of the State of New Jersey*, vol. X, by New Jersey Historical Society (Newark, 1886), 452–53. For the phrase “Spartan Common-Wealth,” see Philip Fithian to John Peck, Aug. 12, 1774, in *Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian: A Plantation Tutor of the Old Dominion*, ed. Hunter Dickinson Farish (Charlottesville, 1957), 160.

<sup>8</sup> Fithian Journal, Sept. 27, 1773, May 11, 1774, Sept. 16, 1773.



The Greenwich, New Jersey, house in which Philip Vickers Fithian was raised. Local legend suggests that several young Presbyterians met there in December 1774 to plan to burn tea unloaded from a British ship docked on the Cohansey River, an event that became known as the Greenwich tea party. *Courtesy Lummis Library, Cumberland County (N.J.) Historical Society.*

community members. Such scribal habits are a testament to his knowledge of the people who inhabited the place where he lived. Births and marriages, baptisms and deaths, were all windows into the life cycle and the history of Cohansey and its families. The act of recording such data, however private, was a celebration of a particular people connected through the generations to a particular soil and tradition.

Religion was a powerful force bonding Fithian to his homeland. Cohansey was steeped in the practices of early American Presbyterianism. Presbyterians had been present there since the late seventeenth century, when New Englanders from the New Haven Colony and elsewhere settled in New Jersey and adopted a presbyterian form of church polity. They maintained three congregations in the region—at Fairfield, Greenwich, and Deerfield—located approximately ten miles apart. Church records from the period and Fithian's own writings reveal a thick web of Presbyterian connections throughout Cohansey. For example, when Quaker candidates for political office canvassed Cohansey for votes in 1772, they reported that any hope of an electoral victory would be "impracticable, as much as the greater part of the country are Presbyterians (our mortal enemies) and should they unite, could put in what men they pleased." Similarly, when Fithian encountered a fellow traveler during a missionary trip to western Pennsylvania in 1775, the stranger remarked that he had spent some time in Cohansey and found the Presbyterian inhabitants there to be "sober,

uniform in their Manner, and every Way so religious.”<sup>9</sup> Regular churchgoing, regular social visiting, the sacramental season when the Lord’s Supper was celebrated, and the ordered practice of Presbyterian worship sustained this local religious culture. The three Cohansey Presbyterian congregations were the most important nodes in Fithian’s social world.

As a descendant of one of the first families of Cohansey Presbyterianism, Fithian had breathed the heavy Reformed air in the region from his birth. He came of age during a time of renewed moral harmony in Cohansey after the first Great Awakening of the 1740s had divided the Presbyterian congregations into New Side and Old Side factions. A decade after George Whitefield and Gilbert Tennent had passed through the region on their feverish quest for souls, the congregations had appointed new ministers who set out to heal old wounds and rebuild community. These pastors, all of whom would play a profound part in Fithian’s religious formation, stressed to their flocks the importance of personal conversion, but they also believed that such conversions were nurtured within the bounds of Presbyterian ecclesiastical and communal practice—not by outsiders.

The ideal candidate for such a conversion was a child of Presbyterians who was baptized in the congregation, catechized by a settled minister, and converted as a young man or woman. Fithian fit the bill perfectly. As he grew older he constantly wrestled with the state of his soul before God and the assurance of his salvation. After nearly a year of searching for such assurance, Fithian, in response to sermons preached by Rev. William Ramsey, minister at the Fairfield Presbyterian Church, recorded an evangelical breakthrough. “I, upon the loving request of God and Christ,” he wrote in March 1766,

have embraced the offers of perpetual reconciliation through Christ; and do purpose by God’s grace, as a reconciled person, to strive against sin, and to serve God with all my power constantly, there I may be sure to have righteousness, and eternal life given to me for the obedience of Christ imputed to me as it is sure that Christ was condemned and put to death for the sins of the redeemed imputed to him.<sup>10</sup>

Shortly after his conversion, it became clear that Fithian was developing intellectual interests that prompted him to envision a future quite different from that awaiting most of Cohansey’s young men. He often spent his afternoons and evenings reading or writing in his journal and even began to contemplate obtaining a formal education in preparation for a career in the ministry. Enoch Green, the clergyman at the Deerfield Presbyterian Church, had just opened a small classical school designed to train young people for careers in law, medicine, politics, and the church. Some of his better students matriculated at the College of New Jersey at Princeton, Green’s alma mater.<sup>11</sup> The choice of a clerical career put Joseph Fithian’s first son on a course

<sup>9</sup> Larry Gerlach, “Quaker Politics in Eighteenth Century New Jersey,” *Rutgers University Library Chronicle*, 3 (Dec. 1970), 1–12; Fithian Journal, June 26, 1775.

<sup>10</sup> Fithian Journal, March 31, 1766.

<sup>11</sup> On Presbyterian academies, see Douglas Sloan, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the American College Ideal* (New York, 1971), 141–42; and Elizabeth Nybakken, “In the Irish Tradition: Pre-Revolutionary Academies in America,” *History of Education Quarterly*, 37 (Summer 1997), 163–83. On the curriculum at Princeton, see Fran-



From 1765 to 1776 the Reverend Enoch Green pastored the Deerfield Presbyterian Church (built in 1771, but shown here as it stood in 1858). Philip Vickers Fithian studied at Green's Presbyterian academy to prepare for matriculation at the College of New Jersey in Princeton and later received instruction for Presbyterian ordination from Green. *Courtesy Lummis Library, Cumberland County (N.J.) Historical Society.*

that would take him away from Cohansey and the family farm. As a middling grain grower of reasonable wealth, Joseph certainly could afford to send his son to school, but young Philip doubtless had to convince his father of the virtues of such a pursuit.

Joseph agreed to send Philip to Green's academy and eventually to the College of New Jersey, but his son's decision to go to school apparently met with little enthusiasm from some Cohansey inhabitants. In response to "Objections" from members of the Greenwich community who thought schooling a waste of time and money, Fithian wrote letters to his father articulating the "advantages" of education. Perhaps with his objectors in mind, he noted that human beings were "prone to mischief" because of their "vicious tempers" that caused them to "debauch the best Principles of Education." Men without "Instruction and Refinement" were "advanced but little above their fellow Creature the Brutes" and were completely ignorant of the principles necessary to live with any degree of "Decency, & Comfort in common life." Fithian justified his education to his father by arguing that "Men of Letters" had the capacity "to refine & often to reform Mankind to correct their Principles, & check their vices."<sup>12</sup> His arguments were saturated in the Enlightenment language of "civilization" and reveal his desire for a path of self-improvement that would demand a break from traditional and time-honored patterns of early modern agricultural life, including family labor and a generational attachment to the land.

cis L. Broderick, "Pulpit, Physics, and Politics: The Curriculum of the College of New Jersey, 1746-1794," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 6 (Jan. 1949), 42-68.

<sup>12</sup> Philip Fithian to Joseph Fithian, Aug. 10, 1767, Sept. 28, 1769, Fithian Papers.

After two years of study with Green at Deerfield, Fithian enrolled in the junior class at the College of New Jersey to complete his formal education. At Princeton Fithian entered a training ground for enlightened gentlemen ready to make their mark on a soon-to-be-revolutionary society. Upon his arrival in America to assume the Princeton presidency in 1768, John Witherspoon had transformed a largely Presbyterian New Side (pro-revival) institution into a college with a curriculum grounded in the Scottish Enlightenment and a commitment to producing public servants for the cause of American liberty. The new president believed that “great and eminent men have generally, in every nation, appeared in clusters,” and he challenged his students to maintain friendships and relationships for the purpose of mutual improvement. Fithian’s classmates at Princeton included future politicians and early national literary figures such as James Madison, Aaron Burr Jr., Hugh Henry Brackenridge, and Philip Freneau. Though Fithian does not appear to have had much social contact with those sons of privilege, he must have worked closely with them as a member of the Whig Society debating club at the college.<sup>13</sup>

While at Princeton, Fithian studied Greek and Latin, logic, rhetoric, classical writers from Homer to Horace, and, of course, theology. But he was also exposed to more contemporary literature such as the new moral philosophy, current works in mathematics and science, belles lettres, and modern poetry. Through debating clubs, public orations, commencement speeches, and informal conversations among friends, the students at Princeton forged a spirited community of inquiry that was particularly exhilarating to the twenty-three-year-old undergraduate from Cohansey. Fithian’s love of learning and quest for self-improvement deepened during his two years at Princeton. “I have here . . . an Opportunity of acquainting myself with the Writings of great & famous Men, & to improve by their Instruction,” he wrote to his mother, Hannah. “And all these Advantages . . . that I have now been mentioning to advance ourselves in Science, are exceedingly helpful in acquiring one other most important Branch of Science, I mean an Acquaintance with Myself.” He would later conclude that his stay at the college was “the most pleasant as well as the most important Period in my past life.”<sup>14</sup>

During his final year at Princeton, Fithian’s parents died, leaving him with the responsibility of caring for his younger brothers and sisters, but with the help of aunts, uncles, and other members of the extended Cohansey Presbyterian community, he was able to continue his studies for the ministry under the direction of Enoch Green and to pursue his efforts at self-improvement. Reading remained very important to Fithian. Books were one of the most effective means of maintaining his membership in the republic of letters from remote Cohansey. There were many hours

<sup>13</sup> John Witherspoon, “Address to the Senior Class,” 1775, quoted in Sloan, *Scottish Enlightenment and the American College Ideal*, 144. On Witherspoon’s Princeton, see Mark A. Noll, *Princeton and the Republic, 1768–1822: The Search for a Christian Enlightenment in the Era of Samuel Stanhope Smith* (Princeton, 1989), 16–58; and Howard Miller, *The Revolutionary College: American Presbyterian Higher Education, 1707–1837* (New York, 1976), 101.

<sup>14</sup> McCluskey, “Life and Times of Philip Vickers Fithian,” 55–58; Philip Fithian to Hannah Fithian, Jan. 12, 1772, Fithian Papers; Fithian journal, Sept. 19, 1774, in *Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian*, ed. Farish, 192–93.

when he “looked over, sorted, and adjusted” his personal library. Like most early American Presbyterians, Fithian read to enhance personal piety. Each morning he studied a chapter from the Greek New Testament, and he meditated on its principles throughout the day. He also read devotional works, such as “Dr. Doddridge’s Paraphrase,” probably Philip Doddridge’s popular *Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*, published in 1745. Doddridge, who strove to foster an evangelical faith rooted in a careful balance of piety and order, would have been especially useful to Fithian in his attempts at cultivating a refined Presbyterianism befitting his academic training at Princeton.<sup>15</sup> In preparation for his examination before the Philadelphia presbytery, Fithian immersed himself in the treatises of Reformed orthodoxy. He read Benedict Pictet’s *Christian Theology*, a standard text for Presbyterian ministerial hopefuls, and Ridgeley’s *Body of Divinity* as a “system” to organize his theological convictions. Since Presbyterians demanded an educated ministry, the examination for ministerial licensing did not focus on divinity alone. In the year following his graduation from Princeton in 1772, Fithian studiously reviewed Greek, moral and natural philosophy, logic, geography, and the Latin classics.<sup>16</sup>

Large portions of Fithian’s reading fell within the field he labeled the “ancients.” Horace, Longinus, Virgil, and Ovid supplemented Homer’s *Iliad* and Lucian’s *Selected Dialogues* on Fithian’s reading list. For the circle of students and alumni of the College of New Jersey, knowledge of the ancients became an important part of the curriculum of self-improvement.<sup>17</sup> Greek and Roman literature provided models of public spirit and disinterestedness, attributes Witherspoon believed essential to the political development of a new nation. The ancient writers were the earliest formulators of free government and thus worthy of example and imitation. Study of those writers, especially in their original languages, would force students throughout the colonies to grasp the ancient understanding of such concepts as virtue, civil society, republicanism, and duty.

Fithian also continued to keep abreast of current and popular literature. He occasionally recorded a saying from Benjamin Franklin’s *Poor Richard’s Almanac* and was familiar with a host of popular novels. He read Joseph Addison and Richard Steele’s *Spectator* almost as regularly as he read his Greek New Testament. Set in the British coffeehouse culture of the eighteenth century, part of the Anglo-American world’s burgeoning “public sphere,” the *Spectator* provided an ongoing conversation on politeness, refinement, good sense, improvement, and civility. In encouraging conversation, it promoted the life-style appropriate to an enlightened society. It was a literary journal that one read as a means of moral and social improvement. As he read, Fithian confronted the republic of letters with a sense of unlimited ambition. “Perhaps my Mind, contracted & fluttering, as it appears to be,” he wrote in 1775,

<sup>15</sup> Fithian journal, April 20, 1774, in *Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian*, ed. Farish, 100; Fithian Journal, July 11, 1773, May 1, 1774; Daniel Walker Howe, *The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy, 1805–1861* (Middleton, 1988), 152.

<sup>16</sup> Fithian journal, Jan. 2, 1774, in *Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian*, ed. Farish 46; *ibid.*, April 21, 1774, p. 101; *ibid.*, May 18, 1774, p. 106.

<sup>17</sup> For use of the phrase “Princeton Circle” to describe the students, professors, trustees, and alumni of the College of New Jersey, see Noll, *Princeton and the Republic*, 3.

“will expand & show a Capacity ample, & important, as Locke’s, or Newton’s, or Witherspoon’s.”<sup>18</sup>

While preparing for his ordination exams, Fithian received news from his friend and fellow Cohansian Andrew Hunter Jr. (also a graduate of Princeton and the nephew of the Greenwich pastor) that John Witherspoon was seeking worthy candidates for a position as tutor on the plantation of Robert Carter III in Westmoreland County, Virginia. Carter was the grandson of Robert “King” Carter, one of colonial Virginia’s largest landholders and one of the most powerful men in southern society. He inherited a plantation in Virginia’s Northern Neck and eventually settled down at Nomini Hall, the manor house his father, Robert Carter II, had built along the Potomac River. Like many Virginia gentry, Carter pursued a life of learning and cultural refinement. Education was central to that life-style, and Carter made sure that his ten children received the schooling necessary to those ends.<sup>19</sup> Fithian listed three reasons why he eventually decided to accept the one-year tutoring post. First, Carter’s offer of a private room and the use of his impressive library afforded Fithian “a longer opportunity for Study than my friends would willingly allow me if I should remain at home.” Second, Fithian sought “a more general acquaintance with the manners of Mankind; and a better Knowledge of the Soil, & Commerce of these neighboring Provinces.” And third, he desired “a more perfect acquaintance with the Doctrines & method of Worship in the established Church in these Colonies.”<sup>20</sup> In October 1773 he left Cohansey for Nomini Hall and soon began a journal that provides one of our best glimpses of everyday life on an eighteenth-century plantation.

Perhaps Fithian’s greatest incentive for taking the tutorial job at Nomini Hall was the opportunity he would have for study, reading, and thoughtful reflection. He arrived during what historians have called the “intellectual golden age” of the colonial Chesapeake Bay area, when planter families built large personal libraries to stay linked to the intellectual life of the republic of letters. Carter’s library was an impressive one, even by the high standards of Virginia planters. It would have been one of the largest collection of books Fithian had ever seen. The tutor felt very comfortable amid the 641 titles and more than 1,000 volumes, which included “a general collection of law books,” “Latin and Greek Classicks,” a “vast number of Books on Divinity . . . by writers who are of the established Religion,” and works of “late famous writers as Locke, Addison, Young, Pope, Swift, Dryden, &c.” He was especially intrigued by the host of English gentlemen’s magazines Carter received, often perusing them the moment that they arrived to acquaint himself with the most current trends in refined living. Newspapers were also a means of staying connected, and Fithian was especially pleased that since Carter subscribed to the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, he could stay informed of newsworthy happenings in New Jersey and Philadelphia.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Landsman, *From Colonials to Provincials*, 38–42; Philip Fithian, self-reflection, 1775, Fithian Papers.

<sup>19</sup> Hunter Dickinson Farish, “Introduction,” in *Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian*, ed. Farish, xxv–xxvii; Louis Morton, *Robert Carter of Nomini Hall* (Charlottesville, 1941); Elizabeth Brown Pryor, “An Anomalous Person: The Northern Tutor in Plantation Society, 1773–1860,” *Journal of Southern History*, 47 (Aug. 1981), 363–92.

<sup>20</sup> Fithian journal, Jan. 2, 1774, in *Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian*, ed. Farish, 46.

<sup>21</sup> Richard Beale Davis, *Literature and Society in Early Virginia, 1608–1840* (Baton Rouge, 1973); Brown, *Knowledge Is Power*, 46–47; Philip Fithian to Enoch Green, Dec. 1, 1773, in *Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers*

Fithian would also learn much about the refined habits of an educated gentleman from his time at Nomini Hall. Colonial Virginia's white plantation culture was sustained through a firmly entrenched social hierarchy and unwritten codes of genteel life. Fithian told his successor John Peck, a fellow Cohansian and Princeton graduate, that "a young Gentleman travelling through the Colony . . . is presum'd to be acquainted with Dancing, Boxing, playing the Fiddle, & Small sword, & Cards." "If you stay here any time," he continued, "your Barrenness in these must be detected." It was evident from the outset that the manners required to function properly in Virginia society were quite different from those needed in the grain-growing villages of Cohansy. Fithian often commented on the importance of "posts of honour, & mental acquirements" to Virginia gentry life. Education was the most valuable of the "mental acquirements," and educated visitors found themselves welcomed. Fithian wrote Peck,

if you should travel through this Colony, with a well-confirmed testimonial of your having finished with Credit a Course of studies at Nassau-Hall; you would be rated, without any more questions asked, either about your family, your Estate, your business, or your intention, at 10,000£; and you might come, & go, & converse, & keep company according to this value.

It was becoming ever clearer to Fithian just what his education was worth—in both wealth and social standing.<sup>22</sup>

Virginia planters believed that their emphasis on education and learning manifested itself in refined human relationships. Sociability and conversation, they affirmed, were important building blocks in the construction of a genteel identity. Ensnared in rural locales away from major cultural centers, planters, as Hunter Dickinson Farish, the editor of Fithian's diary, has noted, were "determined they should not return to barbarism in the wilderness." Polite behavior was just one way the planter class exemplified the social graces of true gentlemen, and Fithian was there to learn that way of life. Fithian informed Peck that

One considerable advantage which you promise yourself by coming to this Colony is to extend the Limits of your acquaintance; this is laudable, & if you have enough prudence & firmness, it will be of singular advantage. . . . You come here, it is true, with an intention to teach, but you ought likewise to have an inclination to learn.<sup>23</sup>

Green and Witherspoon had taught their pupil that conversation was vital to a civilized life. Fithian thus found the dinner table at Nomini Hall an especially worthwhile place to experience sociability with Carter and his frequent visitors. He recorded the topics of conversations at meals, which included marriage and widowhood, nursing children, dancing, books, manners, and science. Carter was well read in philosophy and astronomy and would often trigger supper conversation by bring-

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*Fithian*, ed. Farish, 26; Fithian journal, *ibid.*, Sept. 10, 1774, p. 188; *ibid.*, March 3, 1774, p. 69.

<sup>22</sup> Philip Fithian to Peck, Aug. 12, 1774, in *Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian*, ed. Farish, 159–61. Fithian, however, lowered (to £5,000) the value his own education or Peck's had in Virginia because the northern tutors were not familiar with some Virginia plantation social graces.

<sup>23</sup> Farish, "Introduction," xvi–xvii; Brown, *Knowledge Is Power*, 50–52; Philip Fithian to Peck, Aug. 12, 1774, in *Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian*, ed. Farish, 162.

ing books on those topics to the table. The tutor reveled in the discussions since they enabled him to receive news, cultivate a sense of cosmopolitanism in the woods of the Northern Neck, and, most important, improve and refine himself.<sup>24</sup>

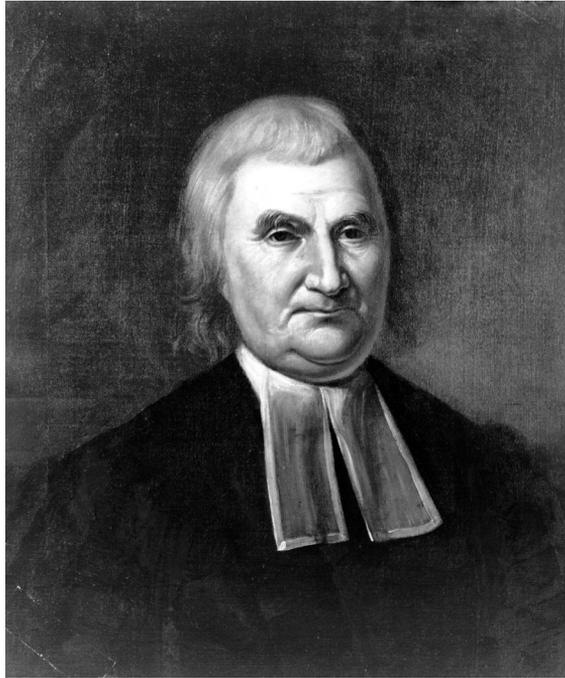
The pursuit of Fithian's third stated goal for going to Virginia—to attain a “more perfect acquaintance with the . . . established Church”—commenced almost immediately. Robert Carter was a devout Anglican who served as a vestryman and warden of the Northern Neck's Cople Parish. He and his family had a choice of worshipping at two Anglican churches in the parish, and their new tutor had ample opportunity to tag along. As a ministerial student, Fithian was a wide-eyed observer of the established religion and some of his observations were quite critical. He commented on the shortness of sermons, the lack of polished pulpit delivery, and the common practice of conducting business before Sunday services. But Fithian's assessment of Anglican practice was not always negative. Though he remained concerned with the brevity of Anglican sermons, he praised them for their “sound morality” and “deep studied Metaphysicks.” While attending worship on Good Friday, Fithian heard Rev. Thomas Smith of the Ucomico Church give “the usual Prayers . . . and a long Sermon very suitable & well chosen.”<sup>25</sup> Fithian and the Anglicans had surprisingly similar views on morality. While Anglicans promoted piety and a personal relationship with God through prayer and the sacraments, they rarely made those practices a dominant theme from the pulpit. Rather, clergy preached sermons grounded in the “moral system of Jesus” that stressed ethical lessons and proper relationships between fellow members of society. The legacy of seventeenth-century English latitudinarianism—a theological and philosophical system that downplayed doctrinal differences in favor of morality and good works—still held sway in the preaching of many Virginia churchmen. The leading of a virtuous life was often more vital to Anglicans than the experience of conversion.<sup>26</sup>

Though Anglicans often looked askance at Reformed evangelical practice that emphasized immediate conversion, there were many points of intersection between Anglicanism and the moral system Fithian had learned as a student at Princeton. Moral philosophy was the intellectual centerpiece of John Witherspoon's curriculum. His lectures on the subject emphasized the learning of moral lessons as one of the fundamental aims of religion. He borrowed freely from the “British moralist” school led by the Glasgow moral philosopher Francis Hutcheson, which stressed that a virtuous life could be attained through the cultivation of what he called the “moral

<sup>24</sup> Fithian's references to dinner table conversations are scattered. See, for example, Fithian journal, Dec. 23, 1773, in *Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian*, ed. Farish, 37; *ibid.*, March 5, 1774, p. 71; *ibid.*, July 17, 1774, p. 145; and *ibid.*, Aug. 11, 1774, p. 158.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, Jan. 2, 1774, p. 46; *ibid.*, Dec. 12, 1773, p. 29; *ibid.*, March 6, 1774, pp. 73–74; *ibid.*, April 17, 1774, p. 100; Philip Fithian to Peck, Aug. 12, 1774, in *Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian*, ed. Farish, 167–68; Fithian journal, *ibid.*, April 1, 1774, p. 88.

<sup>26</sup> This discussion of Anglicanism is based on Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York, 1976), 67–74; Patricia U. Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America* (New York, 1986), esp. 98; Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), 166–68; Norman Fiering, “The First American Enlightenment: Tillotson, Leverett, and Philosophical Anglicanism,” *New England Quarterly*, 54 (Sept. 1981), 307–44; and John F. Woolverton, *Colonial Anglicanism in North America* (Detroit, 1984).



The Reverend John Witherspoon (1723–1794), Presbyterian clergyman and president of the College of New Jersey in Princeton, trained his students in the rudiments of eighteenth-century moral philosophy, Whig politics, and evangelical religion. Philip Vickers Fithian studied under his direction from 1770 to 1772. *John Witherspoon* by Charles Willson Peale, after Charles Willson Peale, 1783–1784. Courtesy Independence National Historical Park.

sense.” The moral sense was an ethical compass placed by God in every human being that when properly trained enabled humans intuitively to arrive at ethically correct assumptions. The moral sense needed to be cultivated, a task that could be accomplished through reading, education, or sociability. In this sense, moral philosophy was as much a “science” as natural philosophy; it was practiced through an experimental and rational analysis of the human condition.<sup>27</sup>

In adhering to the idea that personal virtue could be attained through rational and natural means, rather than by the personal appropriation of God’s grace, Witherspoon’s ethical thought was rooted firmly within a Scottish Enlightenment that made the science of morals a focus of attention. Witherspoon believed that moral behavior would not, and could not, contradict the teachings of the Bible—God was the author of both the Scriptures *and* moral principles—but he also maintained that morality could be constructed through *inductive* experimentation. Such a view stood in direct opposition to a brand of ethics—upheld by many eighteenth-century evangelicals—in which morally correct behavior was *deduced* by systematizing the

<sup>27</sup> On the new moral philosophy, see Norman Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards’s Moral Thought and Its British Context* (Chapel Hill, 1981).

revealed commands of divinely inspired Scripture. Despite his devout evangelicalism (a primary reason he was called to the presidency of Princeton), Witherspoon often placed more emphasis on virtuous acts and the teaching of morals than on traditional evangelical concerns such as conversion.<sup>28</sup> Having come to Virginia fresh from his study with Witherspoon, Fithian was armed with this enlightened understanding of the moral world. It is unclear whether Virginia Anglicans employed the Scottish moral-sense tradition in their sermons and approach to ministry, but their emphasis on earthly virtues had much in common with the teachings of the Princeton circle. The Virginia sojourn thus presented an ideal opportunity for Fithian to experience this world of enlightened Anglican morality at work.

Fithian left Nomini Hall in October 1774 and would never again return to the plantation. His yearlong Virginia sojourn was nothing less than a cosmopolitan experience. He became aware that a college education qualified him for at least limited participation in this world of books, conversation, and self-improvement. Life in the plantation Chesapeake would have been quite foreign to his now-deceased parents and most of his Cohansey friends, but Philip Vickers Fithian belonged. The trip was the culmination of what, at first glance, appeared to be a journey away from home and toward the world citizenship required of all true members of the republic of letters.

But unlike the ideal eighteenth-century citizen of the world—the intellectual itinerant who left home in order to circulate in the Atlantic world’s coffeehouses, clubs, libraries, and other elite social circles—Fithian returned to Cohansey. In fact, throughout his experiences in Princeton, in Virginia, and later as an ordained Presbyterian minister, he struggled with the ramifications of his decision to pursue the life of an educated gentleman. Men of the Enlightenment were, above all else, rational beings. They had learned from their college training in faculty psychology that if a society was to be virtuous, enlightened, and refined, the “passions,” an essential faculty in the psychological makeup of all human beings, had to be regulated. Passions were not in themselves wrong or unruly, but they could promote societal confusion and disorder when not governed by reason. When passions were allowed to rage out of control, the harmonious relationship between the faculties would be disrupted, resulting in disorderly and barbaric behavior. The gentleman’s life must therefore be one of restraint.<sup>29</sup>

For Fithian, holding the passions in check was never easy. While in Virginia he composed a sermon on the regulation of the “inordinate affections.” The passions had long been a source of great perplexity to him. Yielding to them brought only temporary fulfillment and satisfaction. As a student at Green’s academy, he wrote,

<sup>28</sup> Miller, *Revolutionary College*, 88–89; Sloan, *Scottish Enlightenment and the American College Ideal*, 123–24, 136. For the argument that the Princeton president “came to stress moral conduct more than conversion itself,” see *ibid.*, 136.

<sup>29</sup> Daniel Walker Howe, *Making the American Self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), 1–20. For an introduction to the history of emotions in America, see Peter N. Stearns and Jan Lewis, eds., *An Emotional History of the United States* (New York, 1998).

"Today my mind seems much engaged (as it too often is) upon natural and low objects, reaching after them with vain solicitude; endeavoring to grasp them into the arms of my passions; and when I obtain the most of my desires, they sink from me like fleeting vanities." He learned at Princeton that the passions were, by nature, the most powerful of the human faculties and would naturally overpower reason if the mind were not properly trained to suppress such an onslaught. Fithian exerted much mental labor in training his rational faculty, finding that rigorous exercise a "painful process." He lamented, "It is an arduous task to bring the Mind to close application; & still greater to lay up and retain useful knowledge." Such knowledge could be acquired only through "Industry, Application, & Pains."<sup>30</sup>

For a gentleman pursuing world citizenship, homesickness was an especially debilitating passion. Love of home and attachment to a given place were irrational because they elevated a commitment to a specific land and specific people over a universal devotion to the human race. How could a person move freely within the boundless republic of letters when he remained wedded to his homeland? To the Enlightenment mind, emotional attachment to a particular people in a particular locale reeked of sentimentality. It was rooted in unprogressive ideals such as prejudice, romantic love, religious faith, and tradition.<sup>31</sup> Fithian's life journey from Deerfield to Princeton to Nomini Hall, and from Cohansey farmer to educated gentleman, provides a vivid example of how one might craft a new modern identity. Yet, the longing for home that he expressed at every point of that journey reveals a young man tormented by the sacrifices required to assume an enlightened self.

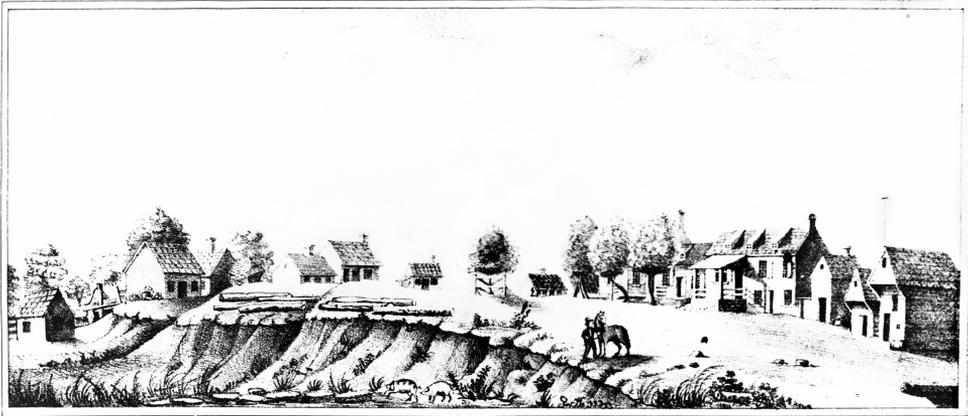
Whether he was in the hallowed corridors of Princeton's Nassau Hall or in the library of Robert Carter, Fithian was always aware of his "beloved Cohansie." How "Strong & Sweet are the bands which tye us to our place of nativity," he wrote from his Virginia bedroom. "If it is but a beggarly Cottage, we seem not satisfied with the most elegant entertainment if we are totally separated from it." Though the genteel life of plantation Virginia was certainly attractive to the young tutor, he had no long-term plans of making his permanent home there. When several of Fithian's friends questioned his decision to go to Virginia, Fithian admitted to Witherspoon that "it will not be easy to break through the entreaties of those who are my nearest relations, and who have all along, with the warmest friendship interested themselves to procure my welfare."<sup>32</sup>

Upon arriving at Nomini Hall and throughout his entire stay in the Old Dominion, Fithian suffered acute bouts of homesickness. He felt "uneasy," "bewildered," and "haunt[ed]" about his choice to leave Cohansey. He made a habit of gazing out the window of his room and then turning to his diary to write about home. "I went to the window before I was drest . . . I could not help casting my Eyes with eagerness over the blue Potowmack and look homewards." The longer he stayed in Virginia, the

<sup>30</sup> Philip Vickers Fithian, untitled sermon, Fithian Papers. Cf. Fithian Journal, April 7, 1766. *Ibid.*, Sept. 6, 1774, Jan. 27, May 2, 1766; Fithian journal, Jan. 2, 1774, in *Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian*, ed. Farish, 46; Philip Fithian to Joseph Fithian, Sept. 28, 1769, Fithian Papers; Miller, *Revolutionary College*, 88–89.

<sup>31</sup> McKillop, "Local Attachment and Cosmopolitanism," 191–204.

<sup>32</sup> Fithian Journal, July 4, 1774; Fithian to John Witherspoon, Aug. 30, 1773, in *Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian*, ed. Farish, 9–10.



GREENWICH, N.J.  
AD. 1800.

Philip Vickers Fithian's beloved hometown of Greenwich, New Jersey, was a small village nestled along the Cohansey River. The town dates back to the original English settlement of the region in 1676 by the Quaker proprietor John Fenwick. *Courtesy Lummis Library, Cumberland County (N.J.) Historical Society.*

more intense his homesickness became. One cold Sunday morning in January, Fithian skipped church services and wrote: "I feel very desirous of seeing Home; of hearing good Mr. Hunter Preach; of seeing my dear Brothers & Sister; Indeed the very soil itself would be Precious to me!—I am shut up in my chamber; I read a while, then walk to the North window & look over the Potowmack through Maryland toward Home." These were hardly the private thoughts of a citizen of the world.<sup>33</sup>

Fithian was well aware of the irrationality of the longing for home. He labored to harmonize the gentlemanly accoutrements he enjoyed at Nomini Hall with the passion-laden feelings for Cohansey. Though he relished the quiet contemplation and scholarly isolation of Carter's plantation, he also realized that such intellectual opportunities had little meaning to him outside of Cohansey and the people who inhabited that place. "This may seem strange," he wrote in June 1774,

but it is true: I have but very few acquaintances [in Virginia], & they easily dispense with my Absence—I have an elegant inviting apartment for Study—I have plenty of valuable & entertaining Books—And I have business of my own that requires my attention—At home my Relations call me proud and morose if I do not visit them—My own private business often calls me off & unsettles my mind. . . . All these put together, when they operate at once, are a strong incitement to divert me from study. Yet I love Cohansie! And in spite of my resolution, when I am convinced that my situation is more advantageous here, yet I wish to be there—How exceedingly capricious is fancy! When I am Home I then seem willing to remove, for other places seem to be full as desirable—It is then Society which makes places seem agreeable or the Contrary—It can be nothing else.

<sup>33</sup> Fithian journal, Oct. 16, 1773, in *Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian*, ed. Farish, 17; *ibid.*, Oct. 12, 1773, p. 16; *ibid.*, Dec. 26, 1773, p. 41; *ibid.*, Jan. 16, 1774, pp. 55–56.

By August 1774 Fithian had come to the point where he was “low Spirited” and could not “eat nor drink” because he was thinking “constantly of Home.” He even felt, using the theological language of his Presbyterian upbringing, that “Sometimes [I] repent my having come into this Colony.”<sup>34</sup>

Another reason for Fithian's bouts of homesickness and his eagerness to return to Cohansey was the friendship he was cultivating with the woman he would eventually marry, Elizabeth Beatty. Fithian had met Beatty in the spring of 1770 while Elizabeth was visiting her sister Mary, Enoch Green's wife. Elizabeth was the daughter of Charles Beatty, a respected New Side clergyman who was settled at the Presbyterian church in Neshaminy, Pennsylvania. Charles was quite familiar with the Presbyterian culture of Cohansey. He maintained a friendship with several Cohansey clergymen and had sent two of his sons to study at Green's academy. Fithian started a correspondence with Elizabeth shortly after he met her and doggedly pursued her affections throughout his Princeton and Virginia years.<sup>35</sup>

Fithian wrote that he had had an “acquaintance” with Beatty since June 1770 and had “happily had an Intimacy” with her since May 1771. “Her Goodness,” he added, “had at length indulged my importunate Solicitations & in her Society I hope to be happy.” Fithian's infatuation with the young woman he affectionately called “Laura” (perhaps referring to Petrarch's devotion to Laura) would put the proper and orderly balance of his faculties to the test. He often noted that on visits to her, he felt “uneasy and disturbed” when it was time to leave. In his first letter to her, he wrote that since their meeting, “I cannot walk nor read, nor talk, nor ride, nor sleep, nor live, with any stomach.” He wrote her “romantic,” “sentimental,” and “private” letters (including poetry) and then, after sending them, realized that he had let his passions get the better of him, as no educated gentleman should. In subsequent letters he profusely apologized for his “romantic and foolish flights” and asked Beatty to “destroy” the given letter or send it “to Oblivion in Flames.” On other occasions he claimed to “blush and condemn myself” after examining what he had written. Fithian was particularly concerned that Beatty destroy two letters written in December 1772. The first was a proposal of marriage that Beatty apparently turned down, and the second reaffirmed his love for Beatty despite the rejection. For these reasons—overexercised passions and irresponsible marriage proposals—some in Fithian's circle of relations disapproved of how he conducted his relationship with Laura. The Greenwich minister Andrew Hunter offered him “corrections” about “his intimacy with Laura,” which Fithian described as “not so agreeable as I should wish.”<sup>36</sup>

Fithian often felt pangs of romantic love for Beatty during his long stretches of homesickness in Virginia. Beatty never replied to Fithian's letters with the speed that he had hoped (sometimes she never replied), and he would often become intensely jealous when he heard rumors from Princeton friends that Beatty had been seen with

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, June 5, 1774, pp. 114–15; *ibid.*, Aug. 18, 1774, p. 171.

<sup>35</sup> Philip Fithian to Elizabeth Beatty, May 14, 1774, Fithian Papers.

<sup>36</sup> Philip Fithian to Beatty, July 15, 1770, *ibid.*; Fithian journal, May 10, 1774, in *Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian*, ed. Farish, 105, 104; Philip Fithian to Beatty, May 12, 1774, Fithian Papers; Fithian journal, May 7, 1774, in *Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian*, ed. Farish, 104, 105; Philip Fithian to Beatty, May 12, 1774, Fithian Papers; Fithian Journal, Jan. 30, 1775.

another young gentleman. For example, when Fithian heard that Elizabeth “loves & courts” one “Mr. Rodman,” the news “distressed” him “exceedingly.” He lashed out against Elizabeth in the pages of his journal, describing her as a “turn-coat” and claiming to “retreat from every former Promise” he had made to her. He refused to “hearken to womanish solicitations” and declared that from then on he would treat her “with contempt.” But when things were going well in their relationship, Fithian often asked himself if he was foolish to want to be near Laura when he had all that could satisfy the wants of an educated gentleman at his fingertips on the Carter plantation. In March he lamented, “In Spite of all my strongest opposing efforts, my thoughts dwell on that Vixen *Laura*. I strive to refuse them admission or harbour them in my heart, yet like hidden fire they introduce themselves & sieze; & overcome me when perhaps I am pursuing some amuseing or useful Study.” Fithian’s love for Beatty was not the only reason he expressed a passion for home, but it certainly played a major role in his longings for “beloved Cohansie.”<sup>37</sup>

Though Fithian knew that his rational cosmopolitanism and passion for local attachments were often at odds, he was usually able to reconcile the two commitments. His faith and education provided him with spiritual and intellectual tools to bring the two worlds—Cohansey and the republic of letters—together in creative ways. He practiced a moral philosophy of everyday life that connected local and cosmopolitan concerns by associating evangelical faith with Enlightenment notions of improvement, especially moral improvement. Late-eighteenth-century Presbyterians espoused a system of religion, virtue, and society that mingled Reformed evangelical faith with Enlightenment beliefs about social progress. In other words, for revolutionary-era Presbyterians, enlightened self-improvement was not far removed from local attachments. Fithian’s rural Enlightenment was grounded in a fellowship of friends, acquaintances, and “relations.” It stemmed from a British intellectual outlook that made the connections between sociability and morality an important theme of inquiry. In the end, Presbyterians could not “live” the British Enlightenment without being connected to a specific place or a community of faith concerned with both Christian living and the pursuit of mutual and moral improvement. As the historian Henry May has argued, the Enlightenment in America made its greatest inroads in the realm of religion and morals.<sup>38</sup>

Because they located the source of right ethical decisions in the moral sense, Scottish moral philosophers and their disciples believed that all humankind had the potential for living virtuous lives. It was the universality of the moral sense—a faculty found in every human being—coupled with its status as a purely natural source of virtue independent of divine grace, that entwined this moral system with the values of the Enlightenment. Hutcheson believed that when cultivated through benevolence and sympathy, the moral sense could produce both personal virtue and the vir-

<sup>37</sup> Fithian journal, Oct. 18, 1774, in *Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian*, ed. Farish, 207; *ibid.*, Dec. 15, 1773, pp. 31–32; *ibid.*, March 22, 1774, p. 84.

<sup>38</sup> May, *Enlightenment in America*, xiv.

tue of an entire society. Such cultivation came through sociability, conversation, friendships, and family life—the stuff of community. The Scottish divine went so far as to argue that the moral sense was not “objective” in its nature, but that correct ethical decisions were validated within like-minded communities. Though Witherspoon often used the term “conscience” to describe the moral sense and placed more emphasis on the rational than the affective dimensions of that faculty, he did stress the need for sociability to train and nurture the conscience.<sup>39</sup> Conducted in the proper manner, human relationships were the foundation of a truly enlightened community. Those who treated one another in a refined, benevolent, and orderly fashion would ultimately produce a virtuous society rather than a “barbaric” or “uncivil” one where human relationships were crude and unenlightened.

This brand of enlightened moral philosophy meshed nicely with the ordered and rational approach to Christianity championed by most late-eighteenth-century Presbyterians. Clergymen trained at Princeton and other colonial colleges certainly preached the importance of a proper “vertical” relationship with God fostered through the hearing of the word and the appropriation of sacramental piety, but they were also concerned with the “horizontal” connections between man and society. Evangelicalism possessed a powerful moral component with the potential to contribute to societal progress. Calvinists believed that the Old Testament law was ultimately a means of exposing sin and pointing people to the regenerative power of New Testament grace, but it could also serve, secondarily, as a moral rule for the larger culture. Furthermore, when New Testament exhortations such as the Golden Rule were obeyed, they produced human social behavior that was pleasing to God and good for society. In a sermon on the moral law, Fithian observed, “Obedience to the moral Laws naturally & universally promotes the Interest of men & makes them more happy in themselves & more useful to one another than they would be without them.” He added, “it is indeed easy to see, by considering the first & Second table of the Law, that all the precepts most exactly & harmoniously agree & are a finished model of true Virtue.” Early American Presbyterians generally, and Fithian specifically, set out to promote a “moral theology” rooted in the social requirements of evangelical faith.<sup>40</sup>

Finally, the moral sense and evangelical notions of virtue were closely related to the public or civic virtue inculcated by the training in republican ideology Fithian received at Princeton. John Witherspoon had taught his students to pursue public lives in service to the greater good of the country. Such civic duty was rooted in the personal virtue of individual members of a society. Though non- or marginally reli-

<sup>39</sup> The best treatment of the communal nature of Francis Hutcheson's moral philosophy is Susan M. Purviance, “Intersubjectivity and Sociable Relations in the Philosophy of Francis Hutcheson,” *Eighteenth Century Life*, 15 (Feb. and May 1991), 23–38. On Witherspoon's moral philosophy, see Thomas Miller, ed., *The Selected Writings of John Witherspoon* (Carbondale, 1990), 36; Jack Scott, ed., *An Annotated Edition of Lectures on Moral Philosophy by John Witherspoon* (Newark, Del., 1982); and Howe, *Making the American Self*, 65–66.

<sup>40</sup> Evangelical Calvinists used God's moral law as a standard to measure the public virtue of the entire society. See Mark Valeri, *Law and Providence in Joseph Bellamy's New England: The Origins of the New Divinity in Revolutionary America* (New York, 1994); Philip Vickers Fithian, untitled sermon, Fithian Papers; and Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought and Its British Context*, 48. Moral theology, which Fiering describes as “supernatural ethics,” was the study of how “human happiness might be attained through the practice of virtue but included in its scope the next world as well as this one.” *Ibid.*

gious citizens could certainly attain it, public virtue could also stem from private morality grounded in evangelical and moral-sense traditions.<sup>41</sup>

Several historians have noted the convergence of the new moral philosophy, Presbyterian moral theology, and republicanism in revolutionary-era public discourse, but little work has been done on how ordinary people applied such ideas within local communities.<sup>42</sup> Fithian's biography gives a glimpse of the ideas as they were applied. Because the vocabularies of the three systems of moral thought overlapped, Fithian could move freely among them in his musings on sociability and virtue, making it nearly impossible to decipher which moral language he was employing at any given time. By embracing a moral vision that drew on those sources, Fithian could engage in the enlightened, universal, and cosmopolitan conversation worthy of a man of letters without abandoning his faith or surrendering his commitment to a particular place. It would take work, but the life of an eighteenth-century gentleman could be lived among like-minded Presbyterians within the confines of such a place as Cohansey.

Participation in the fellowship of students associated with Enoch Green's academy served as one means of practicing this moral philosophy of everyday life in Cohansey. In addition to pursuing their formal schooling together, the academy's students maintained daily contact with each other outside the classroom. They regularly visited one another's homes, nurtured friendships, and conversed in reading groups and via personal letters. In the eighteenth century, friendship was an important means of fostering virtue. The personal affection and sympathy between friends created a social bond that, according to Hutcheson, contributed to the development of the moral sense. Friendship was infused with a moral excellency and social harmony, encouraging a concern and care for an individual beyond what was expected in other human relationships. Thomas Ewing, a student at the academy, wrote to Fithian to make amends for a rift in their friendship: "I do beg your pardon for accusing you falsely, and I hope [you] will forgive me; so that we may know our friendship tied with such an inveterable knot . . . [will] never be destroy'd till our bodies and souls are separated from this world by Death." In 1771 Ewing wrote Fithian at Princeton, "My dear friend, your advancement is so nearly connected with my happiness that one is absolutely consequent to the other; every step you take toward the *Ne plus ultra* of literature, animates me to think that my friend is capable of making progress in the path which has immortalis'd so many of the British genius." True enlightened friendship required mutual encouragement on the road to self-improvement.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>41</sup> For the argument that by "grounding moral judgment in a rational faculty rather than God's law, he [Hutcheson] opens the way for appeals to [nonreligious] Greek and Roman civic virtues," see Purviance, "Inter-subjectivity and Sociable Relations in the Philosophy of Francis Hutcheson," 24. On republicanism, see Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill, 1969); and J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, 1975).

<sup>42</sup> On the convergence of the vocabularies of evangelicalism, republicanism, and the new moral philosophy, see Mark A. Noll, "The American Revolution and Protestant Evangelicalism," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 23 (Winter 1993), 615-38; James T. Kloppenberg, "The Virtues of Liberalism: Christianity, Republicanism, and Ethics in Early American Political Discourse," *Journal of American History*, 74 (June 1987), 9-33; Ruth Bloch, "The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America," *Signs*, 13 (Autumn 1987), 37-57; and John Murin, "Religion and Politics in America from the First Settlements to the Civil War," in *Religion and American Politics: From the Colonial Period to the 1980s*, ed. Mark A. Noll (New York, 1990), 19-43.

<sup>43</sup> Purviance, "Intersubjectivity and Sociable Relations in the Philosophy of Francis Hutcheson," 26; Lawrence

Shortly before he began his studies at Princeton, Fithian sent his cousin Amy "An Epistle on the Excellencies of Friendship." In it he affirmed, "there is something useful & very mystical in the private mutual Transactions of two Persons directed by Principles of Virtue & Honour to take a Vow of Friendship & to maintain individual unconditional Harmony." Friendship served a civilizing function. Fithian remarked that the attainment of true friendship required humans to "bridle over our Inclinations" and "guard our Actions" in order to avoid the passionate side of human relations that was governed by a "thousand jealousies." In this sense, friendship helped balance the human faculties. Fithian added that true friendship, which should be "cultivated with unremitting diligence," distinguished the refined individual from the social interactions of the "Brutal Creation." It was "the most refined, satisfyingly earthly Joy that a human creature can endure" and "worthy of Pursuit of every wise and intelligent Person." Cohansy Presbyterians also made friends as a form of Christian fellowship, a kinship among believers ordained by God for the promotion of spiritual growth. Such friendship found its source in the grace of God and could be enjoyed only by those of like-minded religious faith. *Christian* friendship could also distinguish the civil from the uncivil. Invoking the languages of both Christianity and enlightened improvement, Fithian reminded his cousin that "to make friendship[s] happy, these should all be guided by a Principle of Piety and Religion without which human Nature is rude barbarous & unpleasant."<sup>44</sup>

Fithian referred to the social interactions between friends and other acquaintances as "conversation." Such human interaction was conducive to moral improvement as long as it was "good" or "useful."<sup>45</sup> The Presbyterian attempt to foster "useful conversation" sheds light on an informal circle of young people, with Fithian at the center, that strove to model itself on the republic of letters. The members gave each other classical names, occasionally penned their letters in Latin, and patterned their conversation after the enlightened coffeehouse culture of the *Spectator*. Useful conversation could also be promoted through writing letters. Letters were composed, discussed, and critiqued for both content and form. For example, Fithian recorded a visit from his friend "Amasio" in which the two students "disputed the nature of a variety of letters." Members of this circle of friends exchanged correspondence on such topics as the proper object of the passions, the eternal fate of sinners and atheists, and the virtue of women. The content of the letters would often be shared with others and discussed at length among the group, creating a scribal community of readers. Fithian, for example, asked his friend Sally Dare to comment on the theme of Amasio's recent letter, which Dare had apparently also read. He requested that Dare recollect "our pleasing interviews and the Discourses that attended them particularly by Amasio's principles" and urged her to "present me a letter, containing the

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Blum, "Friendship as a Moral Phenomenon," in *Friendship: A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Neera Kapur Badhwar (Ithaca, 1993), 192–210; Thomas Ewing to Philip Fithian, March 13, 1766, Feb. 9, 1771, Fithian Papers.

<sup>44</sup> Philip Fithian, "An Epistle to Miss Amy Fithian on the Excellencies of Friendship, Written at Greenwich, December 8, 1769," Fithian Papers.

<sup>45</sup> Ned C. Landsman, "Esther Edwards Burr and *The Nature of True Virtue*: Books and Conversation, Piety and Virtue in the Presbyterian Enlightenment," paper presented to the Columbia Seminar in Early American History, Columbia University, 1995 (in John Fea's possession, cited with permission).

full contents of your heart respecting it, and I will likewise offer you my sentiments upon them."<sup>46</sup>

Other letters delved into more political and philosophical topics. Fithian wrote a letter to his friend Rowena comparing the hostile relationship between England and her colonies with the politics of Rome under Julius Caesar. He encouraged her to develop the type of civic virtue needed by all colonists to defend their liberty against the Crown. James Ewing shared some thoughts on moral philosophy with Fithian: "Moral Philosophy or Ethics is an art which treats of virtue & vice and prescribes rules for attaining one, and avoiding the other; according to this definition we shall leave religion (that is revealed religion) as belonging to theology and Divinity." He asserted that "virtue" was the "only way to Happiness" and stressed that knowledge of self was absolutely essential to the promotion of such virtue. Yet he also held that both virtue *and* religion were needed to foster such happiness. He made sure he "would not be understood to mean that virtue, or moral good, without Religion was the way to happiness." Moral-sense language urging the rational control of the passions and the evangelical injunction to examine one's heart for sinful patterns were equally present in this self-understanding.<sup>47</sup>

Another means of conducting useful conversation was through face-to-face discussion of printed material. Even popular print, such as novels—a literary genre that Protestants traditionally frowned on for its immoral content—could serve to cultivate virtue. In summer 1773, Frances Brooke's epistolary novel, *The History of Lady Julia Mandeville*, was a topic for "useful conversation" among a group of friends in Cohansey. *Lady Julia*, published first in London in 1763 and republished in Philadelphia two years later, was a collection of fictional letters exchanged among innocent young Julia, her lover, Henry Mandeville, and Lady Anne Wilmot, an acquaintance of the two lovers. Like many novels of its era, it offered insight into matters of sensibility and refinement in the eighteenth-century Anglo-American world. Brooke used the novel as a form of social and moral commentary. For example, Julia read the popular courtesy books of her era that stressed modesty, chastity, concern for one's reputation, and other virtues. The novel ended with a duel between Henry and Lord Melvin, an aristocratic friend of Julia's family who was to marry the heroine. Henry was fatally wounded in the duel, providing the perfect outlet for Brooke to condemn that "savage" practice.<sup>48</sup>

One evening during the Cohansey harvest season, while several young people were gathered together "talking carelessly, as usual upon various Subjects," one participant in the conversation, who was sitting nearby reading *Lady Julia*, asked the group (who

<sup>46</sup> The circle of correspondents took on classical names such as Amasio, Theron, Hortentio, and Diore. Fithian took the name Ireneo. Amasio to Philip Fithian, March 3, 1767, Fithian Papers; Fithian to Sally Dare, June 8, 1767, *ibid.* On "scribal communities," see Harold Love, *Scribal Publication in Seventeenth Century England* (Oxford, 1993), esp. 179–82.

<sup>47</sup> Philip Fithian, "An Epistle to Rowena, written at Deerfield, July 7, 1769," Fithian Papers; James Ewing to Ireneo, July 27, 1767, *ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> The following discussion is indebted to Landsman, "Esther Edwards Burr." On the religious opposition to novel reading, see Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York, 1986), 38–54. Frances Brooke, *The History of Lady Julia Mandeville* (1763; London, 1930); Lorraine McMullen, *An Odd Attempt at a Woman: The Literary Life of Frances Brooke* (Vancouver, 1983).

apparently had read the work) whether they felt the novel was “well-written & entertaining.” A member replied that the book was “in his Opinion . . . Well Written, highly entertaining, & best calculated for the refreshing & improving our Behaviour, of any Novel now extant.” A female participant in the conversation, whom Fithian described as a “proposed wit,” offered a different perspective. She told “the young Fellow that there were only two or three Select Letters in the Whole Book that could deserve his, or anyones attention.” Further disagreement ensued about the character of Lady Anne Wilmot, Julia’s lively and outspoken alter ego. One member of the group viewed Wilmot as representative of the “finished character of a Coquet,” comparing her to “four or five [real-life] Ladies, whose Behavior . . . exactly coincided with her in the novel.” The woman responded, defending the character of Lady Anne against the accusation and expressing shock that the same man, the previous day, had described Wilmot as a “Prude.” The apparent contradiction between the two interpretations of the character of Lady Anne Wilmot, according to this female “wit,” revealed the young man’s ignorance, since a woman could not be both a “Coquet” and a “Prude.” At this point Fithian interjected, seeking some moderation of what was becoming an impassioned debate. He “observed” that both parties were “mistaken in their opinion about the Characters, & each [was] too warm in their own Cause.” The character of Lady Wilmot, Fithian noted, was not “What the *Spectator*, calles a ‘fine Woman,’” but the “Gentleman’s” argument that the character was a “Coquet” was not totally accurate either. Ever the diplomat, Fithian “turned” the conversation quickly to a new topic—a discussion “upon Mr. Locke’s Opinion ‘That the Souls of all mankind when first infused into our Bodies have equal abilities.’”<sup>49</sup>

The debate over the merits of *Lady Julia* was not based solely on the novel as a piece of entertainment (although that too was mentioned) but was also centered on the novel’s “refining” and “improving” qualities. The private and autonomous reader engaged himself with a fellowship of other readers, forming an interpretive community that haggled over the moral value of the literary work. *Lady Julia* was “useful” to the degree that it served as a model of virtuous living for Fithian and the local inhabitants of rural Cohansey.<sup>50</sup> This case also reveals that good conversation was also orderly conversation. The woman in the discussion did not engage in a “useful” mode of conversation because she was “ready to believe any remarks which are made upon the Characters in general in Conversation, to be pointed and severe.” The overheated passions of this “proposed wit” were not conducive to useful conversation. Disruptive and inordinate outbursts undermined the rational order of conversation and did little to promote enlightened improvement. Finally, this reading circle occurred as part of the daily agricultural rhythms of Cohansey life. The harvest season, with its community-based labor patterns, provided the impetus for this friendly gathering. This ritual of the agrarian calendar offered an opportunity for a cosmopolitan conversation worthy of a local manifestation of the republic of letters.

<sup>49</sup> Fithian Journal, July 21, 1773.

<sup>50</sup> Landsman, “Esther Edwards Burr.” On interpretive communities of novel readership, see Davidson, *Revolution and the Word*, 9, 45, 49. Many of the philosophers on whom Fithian and his circle drew for their understanding of moral improvement were ardent opponents of novels and novel reading.

In 1772 several of Green's students began meeting in more organized communities of benevolent criticism. They formed the Bridge-Town Admonishing Society, an informal club that met in the Cohansey town of Bridge-Town, founded "by the voluntary agreement of several Persons . . . for the regulation of each others conduct & to fulfill them with punctuality & Sincerity; as also to improve ourselves in several parts of useful and ornamental knowledge." Members wrote letters admonishing each other and providing intellectual and moral reflection on a variety of subjects. Fithian's opening address to the group reveals that the members of this "little well-formed club" had ambitious and cosmopolitan goals. He believed that the society would "gain a reputation abroad" as long as the members fostered a sense of "harmony & Union amongst themselves." Fithian asserted further "we should remember that our personal entertainment & improvement as individuals depends on the diligence of the Members in general." Discord and division in the club, as in the larger society, was prompted by a "disease of the mind" that Fithian defined as the "passions turn'd out of their original course and fixt upon wrong objects." When passions were allowed to spiral out of control, as in the novel-reading circle described above, the harmonious relationship between the human faculties would become unbalanced and result in a "disease" that could contribute to social discord.<sup>51</sup>

In the club the passions could be guarded in two ways. As Calvinists, Fithian and his fellow Cohansey Presbyterians believed that the "disease" was rooted in man's moral depravity as a child of Adam but could be cured by a dose of "special grace," available only through regeneration. Moreover, the negative *effects* of the passions, or what Fithian called "the violence of the disease," could be moderated (in the absence of a conversion experience) through "strict and constant attention to the dictates of reason." While divine grace was essential to *sanctify* dangerous appetites, all men possessed the moral power to *regulate* the passions. Jealousy, envy, revenge, or pride could destroy the mutual trust of the society and prohibit the openness that would permit members to correct one another morally. The disease was thus "communicable"—its unchecked spread would slowly destroy the group.

How very dangerous then, would it be if not quite destructive to our comfort & Happiness, in this Society, if any hurtful passion should grow to be predominant amongst us? . . .

Let us therefore banish the first appearance of the passions so destructive to Society; & mutually thrive by Friendship & diligence to promote our common good which will also tend to our personal improvement, that our society may rise & flourish.<sup>52</sup>

The Bridge-Town Admonishing Society fit well into the revolutionary world that gave it birth. Good republican citizens were virtuous citizens seeking to promote a civil society through the moral improvement of its members. As the hostilities between England and its colonies reached a fever pitch, so did the activities of this rural club. In general, American Presbyterians positioned themselves among the most

<sup>51</sup> Philip Fithian, "An Exercise in the Admonishing Club," March 16, 1773, Fithian Papers.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

ardent supporters of independence. The official Presbyterian pronouncements on the Revolution were informed by Whig ideas about the protection of liberties, particularly religious liberties, from an English government that was placing those freedoms at risk. In its formal statement on the conflict, the combined Synod of New York and Philadelphia noted "there is no example in history, in which civil liberty was destroyed, and the rights of conscience preserved entire." Liberties and "inestimable privileges" that the colonies had "hitherto enjoyed without interruption since the first settlement of this country" were now in jeopardy, and Presbyterians, perhaps more than members of any other Protestant denomination, would rise up in their defense. The synod instructed its members to support the Continental Congress with prayer, defend their rights as "FREEMEN and BRITONS," and take up arms if necessary.<sup>53</sup>

Presbyterians understood the Revolution in distinctly moral terms, for a nation without virtue had no platform from which to direct its supplications to God. Ministers urged their congregants not only to confess personal sins but also to repent of "those prevalent national offenses which may be justly considered as the procuring causes of public judgments." Only if Americans confessed public transgressions of "profaneness and contempt of God and his Name," or "pride, luxury, uncleanness," or "neglect of family, religion and government," would God "hear our supplications, and interpose for our protection or deliverance." "It is undeniable," the synod added, "that universal profligacy makes a nation ripe for divine judgments, and is the natural means of bringing them to ruin, reformation of manners is of the utmost necessity in our present distress." The inclination to engage in immoral activities, moreover, worked counter to freedom. It was a sign of dependence, representing the enslavement of an undisciplined will to the passions. Moral citizens, living ordered lives, were the foundation of the colonial character needed to resist British tyranny.<sup>54</sup>

In the charged environment of the American Revolution, Fithian reached maturity. He was taught at Princeton that it *was* appropriate to exercise the passions in the defense of liberty. In his commencement disputation he echoed the words of the eighteenth-century political tract of John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, *Cato's Letters*, by defending the notion that "political jealousy is a laudable passion." He distinguished between "domestic and ecclesiastical jealousies," which were harmful, and "political jealousy," which was "rational & uniform & necessary." As Fithian had learned too well through his courtship of Elizabeth Beatty, "jealousy" was normally a dangerous "disease" that could blight friendships and lead to "suspicions" among acquaintances. But when channeled in the right direction, it was also a very useful passion. Political jealousy was important to the vocabulary of the American Revolution and to the larger "Country" or "republican" ideology that influenced much of the language of revolutionary elites. The truly "jealous" citizen kept a careful and virtuous watch on his government leaders to guard against vice and corruption. Political jealousy served as a unifying force—a common political ideology grounded in an

<sup>53</sup> "A Pastoral Letter &c.," May 1775, in *Minutes of the Presbyterian Church in America, 1706–1788*, ed. Guy S. Klett (Philadelphia, 1976), 543–46, esp. 545 and 543.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*; Ann Fairfax Withington, *Toward a More Perfect Union: Virtue and the Formation of American Republics* (New York, 1991), 15–16.

enlightened common morality—that held a nation together and preserved natural order. Fithian said that it had a “natural tendency” to “unite people” around interests that were closely associated with the preservation of the nation.<sup>55</sup>

It is only through this understanding of political jealousy that we can begin to fathom why a supposedly civil and enlightened Presbyterian such as Fithian would engage in an act of local political rebellion that could be described as uncivil and unenlightened. The members of the Bridge-Town Admonishing Society, along with other public-spirited young Cohansey Presbyterians, initiated what has become the most celebrated event in Cumberland County history—the Greenwich tea party. In December 1774, approximately one year after the famed tea party at Boston Harbor, the British brig *Greyhound*, carrying tea to Philadelphia, docked on the Cohansey River at Greenwich and unloaded its cargo for safekeeping during the night. While town officials met on the evening of December 22 to decide how to respond to the brig’s arrival, Cohansey patriots disguised as Indians burned the tea. All but one of those Indians was affiliated with one of the three Cohansey Presbyterian churches, and Greenwich antiquarians have suggested that the tea burners organized themselves at the home of Fithian. Gov. William Franklin’s attempt to press criminal charges was frustrated by the local sheriff, Timothy Elmer, a Presbyterian and supporter of the tea party. When the war for independence broke out in 1775, the case, along with a similar civil suit filed by the owners of the tea, was postponed indefinitely.<sup>56</sup>

Cohansey would be one of the few hotbeds of patriotic resistance in Quaker-dominated southern New Jersey, and Fithian would spend the last months of his life in service to the Whig cause. Upon his ordination, he prayed that he might “have in my own heart much of the meekness and Spirit of the Gospel, & may have a sense of my duty in these times of distraction & Misery—Furnish me with an uniform & unbiass’d love for my Country; & give me courage to engage in every method that has a tendency to save her from Ruin, even if my life should be in Danger in the Competition.” When Fithian left Cohansey on a second missionary trip to western Pennsylvania, he described the revolutionary fervor in his region: “We leave New-Jersey in a melancholy State! Battalions of Militia & Minute-Men embodying—Drums & Fifes rattling—Military Language in every mouth—Numbers who a few Days ago were plain Countrymen have now clothed themselves in martial Forms . . . Resolved, in steady manly Firmness, to support & establish American Liberty, or die in Battle!”<sup>57</sup> After he completed his journey, in spring 1776, Fithian spent several months at home

<sup>55</sup> Philip Fithian, “An Exercise at the Public Commencement at Princeton College,” Sept. 10, 1772, Fithian Papers; John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, *Cato’s Letters* (1755; 2 vols., New York, 1971), I, 260–61; James H. Huston, “The Origins of the ‘Paranoid Style in American Politics’: Public Jealousy from the Age of Walpole to the Age of Jackson,” in *Saints and Revolutionaries: Essays in Early American History*, ed. David D. Hall, John Murrin, and Thad W. Tate (New York, 1984), 332–72.

<sup>56</sup> Fithian recorded that “Tea was, by a number of persons in disguise, taken out of the House & consumed with fire.” Fithian Journal, Dec. 18, 22, 23, 1774. The best and the only scholarly treatment of the Greenwich tea party is found in Larry Gerlach, *Prologue to Independence: New Jersey in the Coming of the American Revolution* (New Brunswick, 1976), 198–202.

<sup>57</sup> Fithian Journal, Dec. 6, 1774, Nov. 13, 1775.

with his new bride, Elizabeth. By the summer he had once again left Cohansey, this time to serve his country as a chaplain to a battalion of militia from the region.

We will never know how Fithian would have harmonized his citizenship in the republic of letters with his love of home in the years following the American Revolution. He died of complications related to dysentery on October 8, 1776, in a war camp near White Plains, New York. Ironically, Fithian died away from his beloved Cohansey. It is doubtful, however, that he would have been disappointed with the place where he died, for he died in service to the cause of liberty, an ideal that he always understood through the convergence of his Presbyterian faith and enlightened notions of morality and order. He had truly imbibed John Witherspoon's advice about the public duty required of the man of letters in defense of Enlightenment values such as political independence. In this sense, Fithian was a clear representative of Gordon Wood's enlightened patriot.

Yet even as he remained geographically removed from what he had once longingly called his "place of nativity," Fithian died as a chaplain to a battalion of soldiers from Cohansey.<sup>58</sup> His battalion was led by Silas Newcomb, a Presbyterian layperson from Fairfield. He regularly ministered to many of the same young men, now soldiers, who were part of his Cohansey social networks. Though his wife, Elizabeth, could not be at his side, Enoch Green, William Hollingshead, Andrew Hunter Jr. (all fellow chaplains), and a host of other close friends and advisers were present. As during much of his short life, Fithian died performing the responsibilities of a member of the republic of letters and of a citizen of a particular place. If Wood is correct in suggesting that true republicans were also true world citizens, then Fithian's cosmopolitan spirit was nurtured within the context of Cohansey's local brand of Presbyterianism, complete with the social networks of friends, relatives, and loves that came with it. Though Fithian never quite framed it in these terms, it seems that he was willing to die not only for his new country but also for his Cohansey homeland.

Fithian's story reminds us that the abstract, urban, and elite-centered republic of letters that has so captivated early American historians over the past two decades had a real impact on individual human experience. While the Thomas Paines and Benjamin Franklins of the eighteenth-century Atlantic world could move freely within that republic, there were others who struggled with the implications that citizenship in this imagined community might have for their commitments to family, friends, faith, tradition, and place. Throughout his short life, Fithian asked not only how he might improve himself but also what might be permanently lost in the process. He rarely acted without considering carefully the answers to both of those queries.

On one level, Fithian's attempt to live Enlightenment values in a given place defined by a given tradition resonates with recent theoretical work on contemporary cosmopolitanism. Today, scholars have largely rejected the notion that a true "citizen of the world" exists without some connection to a specific locale that might be called

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, July 4, 1774.

home or a specific set of beliefs that might be informed by tradition. Theorists now realize that even amid advances in air travel, the rise of international markets, and the technological creation of a “global village,” a pure cosmopolitanism, or a truly “placeless” individual, does not and cannot exist. Yet those who write about such issues of self-identity today always make the cosmopolitan ideal their point of scholarly departure. They begin with world citizenship—the highest of all moral values—and then make the necessary concessions to the particularities of region, nation, and family. The result is what has recently been described as “rooted cosmopolitanism,” a cosmopolitanism that “is *there*,” or an “actually existing cosmopolitanism.”<sup>59</sup>

Many middling, relatively unprivileged, and educated early Americans living in places teetering between the medieval and the modern, however, understood local attachments—not world citizenship—as the necessary starting point in the construction of a modern self. Rather than rejecting commitments to the particularities of place and tradition, as Wood has suggested, good patriots and republicans such as Fithian strove to participate in the eighteenth-century equivalent of intellectual and cultural globalization in the context of their locales. Fithian’s Christianity, networks of friends, letter-writing circles, admonishing societies, and reading groups were all means of being cosmopolitan in a given place. He thus pursued a “cosmopolitan rootedness” over a “rooted cosmopolitanism.” In the end, Fithian’s life challenges us to be ever more mindful that the ideas and ideals of the Enlightenment could have a profound influence on the remote precincts of British America and the social worlds of the people who inhabited them. For him, “rural Enlightenment” was not an oxymoron.

<sup>59</sup> See, for example, Cheah and Robbins, eds., *Cosmopolitanism*; Martha Craven Nussbaum, “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism,” in *For Love of Country*, by Nussbaum et al., 2–17; and Martha Craven Nussbaum, “Reply,” *ibid.*, 133–44. For characterizations of cosmopolitanism, see Bruce Robbins, “Actually Existing Cosmopolitanism,” in *Cosmopolitanism*, ed. Cheah and Robbins, 1–2; Bruce Ackerman, “Rooted Cosmopolitanism,” *Ethics*, 104 (April 1994), 516–35; and Mitchell Cohen, “Rooted Cosmopolitanism,” *Dissent*, 39 (Fall 1992), 478–83.