

Elections in 1777 and How Madison Lost One

“Elections in Early Virginia” first appeared in the *Tidewater Review of West Point, Virginia* and was reprinted with permission in the November 1993 *Orange County Historical Society Newsletter*. It explains how elections were conducted in early Virginia and how James Madison lost one in 1777.

“In the days of Washington and Jefferson [prior to the Revolutionary War] *Virginians* voted to fill only one office--that of burgess. Each county was entitled to send two members to the House of Burgesses. Voters in the city or borough also sent two. The faculty of the college of William and Mary sent one.

“There was no requirement remotely approaching registration. However, a man had to own a modest amount of property before he could vote. Women, slaves, and freed slaves could not vote. Dissenters (non-Anglicans) could not vote but they did. The provision of the law was generally ignored.

“A man could vote more than once if he took the trouble. A planter or other property-owner could cast a ballot in any county where he owned land. A professor at the College could vote once as a faculty member and again as a resident of Williamsburg or one of the nearby counties if he owned land there.

“If these rules seem strange, so do early ideas of political manners. A candidate for the House was not supposed to go around openly asking his fellow-citizens to vote for him. In the course of his candidacy, however, his friends could declare their support. That was entirely proper.

“All political activity took place at the courthouse, which was fixed by law as the election place. A writ issued by the royal governor set the date. The sheriff posted the writ at the courthouse and gave copies to the rector of the parish and his lay readers.

“When election day dawned, the candidates came to the courthouse. Being absent for any reason was known to cost a man the election. Each came with his own ‘writer’ or clerk to tally his votes. Some candidates set out big bowls of punch to influence the undecided--a practice called “Swilling the voters with bumbo” was not regarded as being quite cricket [fair and honorable behavior].*

“A hotly contested election could stir up fist fights--so could a vestry meeting incidentally--but the sheriff was there to hold rowdiness in check. There was no secret ballot. On the contrary, each voter had to call out in a distinct voice the name of his choice. Each candidate’s ‘writer’ kept a running total, so everyone knew, at any time, how the election was going.

“As one man forged ahead, shouts of triumph came from his supporters, scowls and growls from his opponents. The sheriff decided when to close the polls, compare the list and determine the

winners. The tallies were filed with the county clerk and were open to inspection at any time. Finally, the winners were certified to the lower house of the Assembly.

When the shouting died, the winners would be raised on the shoulders of their supporters. Then as now, a banquet and often a ball concluded the 'festivities.' These affairs were held in the ordinary or tavern that was an inevitable fixture of the rural courthouse scene.

*"Orange County's James Madison, who was later to become President of the United States, failed to be re-elected to the Virginia House of Delegates for 1777, a defeat which many historians, and Madison himself, attributed to his having failed to 'swill the voters with bumbo.'"¹

From Historian William H.B. Thomas in his book, "Patriots of the Upcountry":

"One long-standing custom in Virginia politics was that of candidates treating the voters to food and particularly drink, or, as one contemporary put it, 'swilling the planters with bumbo.' In the 1777 election Madison, believing the dispensing of rum punch, whiskey, and other refreshing beverages a 'corrupting influence,' sought to introduce another and better way of doing things. He refused to treat the voters. He was also decisively beaten by Charles Porter. "The old habits were too deeply rooted,' it was reported, 'to be suddenly reformed.'²

"In no wise [sic] was this a setback for Madison. The following year he triumphed at the polls in Orange County, winning back a seat in the House of Delegates. His victory was particularly satisfying. He had probably not even declared for the office, was indeed absent from the county on other service, had not solicited votes, and had not treated the electorate. Those who refused him the office before were the same who now gave him support without reservation. That other service which had kept him away from Orange, it might be added, were his duties as a member of the eight-man Council of State or Privy Council as it was likewise known, which, with the governor, had supervision of Virginia's war effort."³

¹ Author unknown. "Elections in Early Virginia, *Orange County Historical Society Newsletter*, Volume 24, Number 11 (November, 1993), 2.

² William H.B. Thomas, *Patriots of the Upcountry, Orange County, Virginia in the Revolution* (Orange, Virginia, Orange Bicentennial Commission, 1976), 55.

³ *Ibid.*, 56.