

## Critical Acts of Commensality and Cultural Capital: How Madeira Wine Served Social Functions Among Anglophone Elites (1815 to 2000)<sup>1</sup>

### Atos Críticos de Comensalidade e Capital Cultural: Como o Vinho da Madeira Cumpriu Funções Sociais entre as Elites Anglófonas (1815 a 2000)

James H. Tuten<sup>2</sup>

#### Abstract

Anglophone elites around the Atlantic World developed a deep appreciation for the fortified wines of Madeira. By the late eighteenth century, madeira wine constituted an important luxury good whose purchase signaled taste, refinement, esoteric knowledge, and affluence. In other words, collecting and consuming madeira wines functioned as cultural capital in Pierre Bourdieu's sense. A second concept from food history applies to social beverages like wine: commensality. Commensality may be defined as the act of

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Chuck R. and Shirley A. Knox Professor of History at Juniata College. Ph.D. in History, 2003, by Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia. Research interests include the United States South, the history of food, and cultural history. Publications: co-editor with Matthew Lockhart, *A History of Southern Hunting: Essays on South Carolina*, University of Georgia Press, forthcoming; 2025, *Lowcountry Time and Tide: The Collapse of The Rice Kingdom*, University of South Carolina Press; 2010, «Understanding Gains from On-Campus Cultural Events», in *Journal of Campus Activities Practice and Scholarship*, 2 (2), pp. 55-66; with Steve Knepper, 2017, «Easy Riders and Hard Roads in the Early Recorded Blues», in SLUETHAUG, Gordon (ed.), *Music and the American Road*, Bloomsbury; 2009, «'Don't Want to see no more... like that:' Climate Change as a Factor in the Collapse of Lowcountry Rice Culture, 1893-1920», in DUPIGNY-GIROUX, Lesley-Ann and MOCK, Cary J. (ed.), *Historical Climate Variability and Impacts in North America*, Springer; 2005, «Liquid Assets: Madeira Wine and Cultural Capital among the Lowcountry Planters, 1735-1900», in *American Nineteenth Century History*, 6 (2), pp. 173-188. Authored 20 book reviews for academic journals; authored 17 editorials that have appeared in newspapers and magazines including *Inside Higher Ed*, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, *Center Daily Times*, *Forbes.com*, *Post and Courier*, *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, *Harrisburg Patriot News*, *Altoona Mirror*, *Providence Journal* (RI), *Christian Science Monitor*; authored 18 encyclopedia entries for a wide range of reference works. Email address: [tutenj@juniata.edu](mailto:tutenj@juniata.edu).

people eating and drinking together. It captures the essential human bonds that people who drink or dine together frequently create. These bonds affect social connections as well as business ties. Some scholarship examines madeira as cultural capital and the scholarship on commensality pays attention to feasts. This paper will join these two lines of scholarship and focus on feasts, madeira parties, and the interaction between cultural capital and commensality when drinking madeira wine.

**Keywords:** Commensality; Cultural Capital; Madeira Wine.

### Resumo

As elites anglófonas do mundo atlântico desenvolveram um profundo apreço pelos vinhos fortificados da Madeira. No final do século XVIII, o vinho da Madeira constituía um importante bem de luxo, cuja compra sinalizava gosto, requinte, conhecimento esotérico e riqueza. Por outras palavras, a coleção e o consumo de vinho da Madeira funcionavam como capital cultural no sentido de Pierre Bourdieu. Um segundo conceito da história da alimentação aplica-se a bebidas sociais como o vinho: a comensalidade. A comensalidade pode ser definida como o ato de as pessoas comerem e beberem juntas. Este conceito capta os laços humanos essenciais que as pessoas que bebem ou comem juntas frequentemente criam. Estes laços afetam as ligações sociais, bem como os laços comerciais. Alguns estudos examinam o vinho da Madeira como capital cultural e os estudos sobre comensalidade prestam atenção a banquetes. Este artigo juntará estas duas linhas de investigação e centrar-se-á nos banquetes, nas festas do Madeira e na interação entre capital cultural e comensalidade quando se bebe vinho da Madeira.

**Palavras-chave:** Comensalidade; Capital Cultural; Vinho da Madeira.

Silas Weir Mitchell wrote *A Madeira Party*, a short volume describing a dinner party that focused on madeira wines. The dinner took place in Philadelphia in the 1830s with four participants. Readers today—nearly 200 years after the carefully described events occurred—would likely find considerable fault with the preoccupations in the little book. Mitchell, an influential and widely published Philadelphia physician, displayed his elitism with conceited mention of luxury brands such as «the tall Wagstaffe clock in the corner», and other signifiers of good taste in the appurtenances of the room. The description of the African American servant in the Philadelphia mansion housing the small gathering makes readers today uncomfortable with its portrait of a diligent servant, though he was presumably a free person, basking in the *noblesse oblige* of his employer<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> MITCHELL, 1985, *A Madeira Party*, p. 5. Thomas Wagstaffe of London professed Quakerism and during the second half of the eighteenth century he rose to prominence in London as a clock maker. He developed a relationship with Quakers in Philadelphia where his clock works often were placed in cabinetry. A “tall Wagstaffe clock” is part of the collections at Winterthur Object: 1952.0246.

During the meal, the men present conversed and joked gently with one another. The self-satisfied banter, while an example of dialogue and thus appropriate to our theme, does not age as well as a good Sercial madeira. To take a single example, one member of the party tells the outsider in the group: «You may like to know [...] that at this table Washington, Lafayette and Franklin have dined.» Another chimes in, «All Madeira men, I doubt not [...] that accounts for a good deal.» At first glance this comment seems a throw-away line, but it bears greater scrutiny. If we read it seriously and literally—and there is no reason not to do so—this reflects smugness, certainly, but it reveals cultural capital at work, too. Like the clock and the wines of highest quality, these gentlemen of distinction understood both themselves and what they ate and drank to be part of a *continuum* that connected them to the Founders of the nation<sup>4</sup>.

Madeira parties were epicurean events, often involving expensive turtle soup and a series of different madeira wines taking the starring role. While conversation varied across many topics, madeira wine itself and its qualities, histories, and mysteries constituted an important part of the agenda. For example, at Mitchell's party the diners discussed primary and secondary flavors in madeira. Finally, one of the *bon vivants*, invoking ineffable, class-bound refinement, opined, «The characterizing taste [of madeira] is too delicate for competent nomenclature. It is a thing transitory, evanescent, indefinable, like the quality of the best manners.»<sup>5</sup> He implied, therefore, that the taste for wine was as difficult to achieve as it was privileged.

Anglophone elites in the eighteenth century, not just in Philadelphia but also around the Atlantic World, developed a deep appreciation for the fortified wines of the Madeira Islands, the roots of which stretched back a century. In 1740, the British Navy expedition that eventually circumnavigated the globe under Lord Anson dropped anchor at Madeira. In Anson's words, by that year, «This island of Madera[sic] [...] is famous through all our American settlements for its excellent wines.»<sup>6</sup> Anson's visit and comment help us date the growing reputation of madeira wine and demonstrate the vital role the islands played for the British maritime system. In the Age of Sail and imperialism, the routes from northern Europe to catch the Trade Winds to the Americas or for rounding the Cape of Good Hope into the Pacific took ships close to the Madeira Islands. Madeira represented one final chance to take on fresh water and the fruits and vegetables that helped prevent scurvy. Therefore, Madeira's economy

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<sup>4</sup> MITCHELL, 1985, *A Madeira Party*, p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> MITCHELL, 1985, *A Madeira Party*, p. 38.

<sup>6</sup> ANSON and MASEFIELD, 1911, *A Voyage Around the World*, p. 24.

relied on this trade, and its wine trade folded into it as ship captains included wine both as part of their ballast for sale in the future, and for their own use. A generation after Anson's visit, in Captain Cook's account of his around-the-world voyages, he too stopped off at Madeira and took on fresh water, food and wine. Around Christmas in 1774, during the second voyage, he noted the celebration included: «Roast and boiled geese, and goose-pie, [...] and they had yet some Madeira wine left, which was the only article of provision that was mended by keeping; so that their friends in England did not, perhaps, celebrate Christmas more cheerfully than they did.»<sup>7</sup>

The special trade relations Britain had with Portugal, and Madeira in particular, played a large role in the developing taste for the island's wines in the Anglophone world. This proved especially true for the North American colonies that gained independence. Planters and merchants from Boston to Beaufort had a love for fortified wines. But merchants and planters in the British West Indies shared in that appreciation of madeira from Bridgetown to Kingston and beyond. The British Empire's ships, both those of the Royal Navy and those belonging to the vast merchant navy under the East India Company, frequented Madeira and took her wines around the globe.

Madeira wine therefore constituted an important luxury good, and its purchase signaled taste, refinement, esoteric knowledge, and affluence. The world-renowned London auction house, Christie's, offered «Fine old madeira» at their inaugural auction in 1766. They have continued to auction madeira wines among their collectable wine offerings down to the twenty-first century<sup>8</sup>. Its collection and consumption provide us with the material for historical cultural investigation. This essay uses the social scientist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, which can be defined as a person's class-bound knowledge, such as knowledge about selecting, handling and discussing a high-value wine like madeira. A second concept from food history applies to social beverages like wine: commensality. Commensality may be defined as the act of people eating and drinking together. It captures the essential human bonds that people who drink or dine together frequently create. These bonds affect social connections as well as business ties. Some scholarship examines madeira as cultural capital, while the scholarship on commensality pays attention to feasts. This paper joins these two lines of scholarship and focuses on feasts, madeira parties,

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<sup>7</sup> COOK, 1979, *Captain Cook's Voyages of Discovery*, p. 205.

<sup>8</sup> CHRISTIE'S, s.d., «A Magnificent Collection of Finest and Rarest Madeira: From the Estate of Mills B. Lane, Jr., of Savannah.» Madeira Club Collection, Georgia Historical Society.

and the interaction between cultural capital and commensality when drinking madeira wine. A third concept of culture developed by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz incorporates “thick description”, defined analyzing the actions and words of people interacting in a social context, such as at the madeira party.

## Historiography

The essential scholarly source on madeira wine is now David Hancock’s wide-ranging and benthic 2009 work *Oceans of Wine*. Hancock explains the rise of madeira wine, or the “Madeira wine system” as he convincingly labels it, as a product and later a luxury commodity for the Atlantic world, especially through an “interimperial market” that witnessed the madeira trade. *Oceans of Wine* shows the qualities of the markets as they grew, and how they at times worked together and extended their reach into the hinterlands of the Western Hemisphere<sup>9</sup>.

As comprehensive as *Oceans of Wine* is as a work of scholarship, it concludes in 1815 to coincide with the close of the Napoleonic Wars. While this historical bookend makes sense within the context of that study, I am placing my emphasis on the period from the 1770s to 2000. This date range spans the terrible *Phylloxera* crisis of the 1860s, when the invasive vine louse from the Americas nearly destroyed the madeira wine industry. This crisis coincided with the disruptions brought about by the US Civil War, which also shaped demand in one of madeira’s most popular markets. I hope to add something to the conversation by extending the time under study, while acknowledging my interests are a subset of Hancock’s. The focus here is on consumption. I am offering an alternative framework by which to understand consumption and its growth in esoterism.

Prior to Hancock’s work, few scholars in the United States paid madeira much attention, with the notable exception of Malcolm Bell, Jr., an expert on Georgia’s lowcountry and its planter class. Bell himself fell under the spell of madeira wine, too, as two articles he wrote for the *Georgia Historical Quarterly* demonstrate. In «The Romantic Wines of Madeira» from 1954, he argued that the unusual character of the wines, combined with the source being a lovely Atlantic Island, led to romanticization of the wines themselves<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> HANCOCK, 2009, *Oceans of Wine* [...], pp. xiv-xx.

<sup>10</sup> BELL, 1954, «The Romantic Wines of Madeira», pp. 322-336. BELL, 1992, «Ease and Elegance, Madeira and Murder: The Social Life of Savannah’s City Hotel», pp. 551-576. BELL, 1987, *Major Butler’s Legacy: Five Generations of a Slave Holding Family*.

In previous work, I used a series of case studies from the South Carolina planter elite to show how madeira served as cultural capital. During the height of their wealth—extracted through brutal use of enslaved people across generations—in the 1850s, rice planters such as Governor Robert F. W. Allston amassed large collections of madeira wine, simultaneously consuming it and sharing the consumption with friends and business associates. Allston's widow and daughter preserved his collection through the Civil War by burying the wine under the road leading to their house, because «Papa had once said it might prove the most salable thing we had after the war.»<sup>11</sup> In the heyday of the Allston family's wealth, madeira was a luxury and a sign of their refinement, but it was also convertible into economic capital when needed. My earlier scholarship on madeira demonstrated several things: the strong affinity that the rice planters of the lowcountry had for madeira wine and the way it functioned as cultural capital in their lives in the nineteenth century<sup>12</sup>.

This essay focuses on Anglophone elites, which demands a definition and explanation. This essay draws most heavily on sources from madeira consumers in the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While David Hancock has shown that women and merchants of modest means also consumed madeira, the high cost and the sources about madeira consumption (like sources on most things of the period) are tilted overwhelmingly toward wealthy white men. I have engaged with sources about madeira consumption in England and her colonies in the Atlantic World.

## Cultural Capital

The way madeira works as cultural capital deserves a deeper explanation. Pierre Bourdieu stands among the most important intellectuals of the later twentieth century, a sociologist with a wide range of interests. Two decades after his death, his theoretical ideas are his most influential. He tried to «transcend the gap between the subjective and the objective dimensions of social life», in the words of leading social theorists<sup>13</sup>. Bourdieu interests those who are concerned with taste and the formation of taste, especially as it exists in conjunction with class. In his work from the 1970s, especially *Distinction*, he sought to lay out a conception of capital in multiple

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<sup>11</sup> PRINGLE, 1922, *Chronicles of Chicora Wood*, pp. 221-222.

<sup>12</sup> TUTEN, 2005, «Liquid Assets: Madeira Wine and Cultural Capital among the Lowcountry Planters, 1735-1900», pp. 173-188.

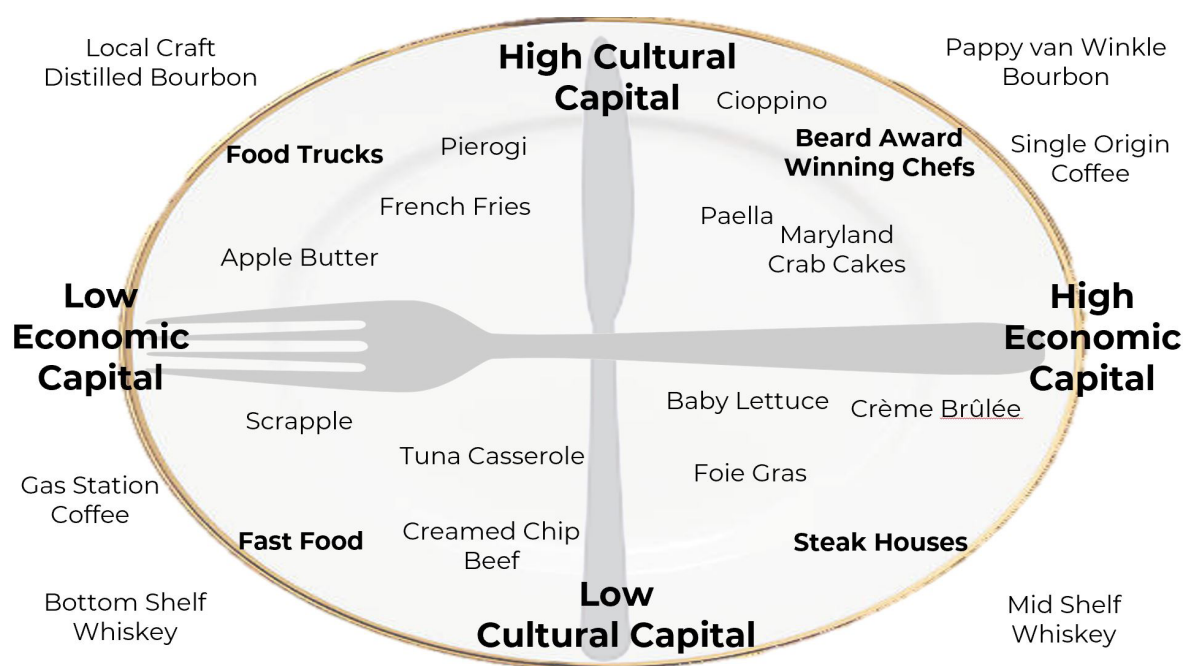
<sup>13</sup> CALHOUN, LIPUMA and POSTONE (ed.), 1993, *Bourdieu: Critical Perspectives*, pp. 2, 4-5.



forms: economic capital (money), social capital (simplified here as relationships and knowledge of how to leverage them), and cultural capital (class-bound knowledge equivalent to taste). In Bourdieu's sociology, then, one can take economic capital and convert it into cultural capital (e.g., by purchasing a painting by a renowned artist). Symbolic capital can be understood in several ways; like cultural capital, it may be used to generate economic capital. For example, academic degrees and professional licenses are symbolic capital, and with a degree in medicine and the license to practice medicine one may make economic capital and signal to others cultural accomplishment<sup>14</sup>.

Other scholars have turned instead to Thorstein Veblen's much older idea of conspicuous consumption, and there certainly is some overlap between that idea and Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital. Cultural capital as a concept, however, has advantages analytically and conceptually. It ties together a host of smaller elements such as knowledge (or connoisseurship) and skills including rhetoric, deportment, and a trained palate. The emphasis on forms of capital as transferable to other forms of capital, or one might say aspects of life, is an essential aspect of his theory<sup>15</sup>.

Image 1 – Cultural Capital Visualized: United States (Pennsylvania), Present Time



Credits: James H. Tuten with Hunter Winters.

<sup>14</sup> CALHOUN, LIPUMA and POSTONE (ed.), 1993, *Bourdieu: Critical Perspectives*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>15</sup> VELEN, 1899, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study in the Development of Institutions*.

## Commensality

If we only focus on madeira and its consumption as cultural capital, we risk isolating motivations and experiences in a way humans rarely live them. As Bourdieu says in *Distinction*, «A *bon vivant* is not just someone who enjoys eating and drinking; he is someone capable of entering into the generous and familiar—that is both simple and free—relationship that is, eating and drinking together, in a conviviality which sweeps away restraints and reticence.»<sup>16</sup> To understand what Bourdieu is describing there, let us turn to the concept of commensality to better understand it.

Commensality, translated as “together at the table”, comes to us from Latin roots. The key to commensality is that social bonds form and a sense of togetherness builds over shared meals or over social beverages. A growing literature attests to commensality’s role in private life, family life, religious groups, friend groups and professional attachment. Tea houses, coffee shops, pubs, saloons and taverns all foster commensality by providing spaces for speech and consumption<sup>17</sup>. Social beverages, shared in company and conversation, appear to create a sense of *bonhomie*, that is, friendliness, attachment, and closeness. Sociology, anthropology and archaeology employ this concept more than most other fields, including history. Many food historians, however, appreciate the concept’s importance. Some scholars describe the process without using the term. Scholars have written about commensality for half a century, but the concept could benefit from even wider use<sup>18</sup>.

“Sociability” is also a useful concept, and overlaps in meaning or replaces the concept of commensality. David Hancock leans on sociability as his preferred way of thinking about drinking in company. The distinction may at first appear to be a fine one, but the distinction matters. Sociability implies eating and or drinking, but it is a more casual concept. Central to the idea of commensality is that lasting bonds are formed through socializing over food or drink. The participants afterward are in a different relationship. Moreover, as noted by Mennell *et al.*, «Commensality is a perilous notion. If sharing food signifies an equivalence among insiders within

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<sup>16</sup> BOURDIEU, 1984, *Distinction*, pp. 178-179.

<sup>17</sup> MENNELL, MURCOTT and OTTERLOO, 1992, «Conclusion: Commensality and Society», pp. 115-119.

<sup>18</sup> KERNER, CHOU and WARMIND (ed.), 2015, *Commensality: From Everyday Food to Feast*, pp. 1-2, 13, 28-29.



a group, it simultaneously defines insiders as socially different from outsiders and marks the boundary between them.»<sup>19</sup>

It is there where cultural capital and commensality interact with each other. When we connect the two, we see that “taste” in the form of cultural capital can be a mechanism to encourage association between people. It also serves to demarcate in-groups and out-groups, as we saw above in the example from the *Madeira Party*. We “see” that process by employing Geertz’s analytical approach.

Clifford Geertz’s concept of “thick description” took a cue from Max Weber, and became an essential method for understanding culture. Geertz wrote «that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun. I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.»<sup>20</sup> Geertz went on to show these webs through case study ethnographies that analyzed closely revealed meaning, such as analysis of special rituals such as funerals or sporting events or more quotidian behaviors and interactions. *A Madeira Party* falls into the former category: such gatherings were occasional events, highly ritualized and special, whose characteristics bear careful analysis. Aside from cultural exploration, however, we also should consider the daily buying, handling, and consumption of madeira to gain that thick description of its role among Anglophone elites<sup>21</sup>.

## Collecting Madeira

We are returning to *antebellum* South Carolina rice planter Robert F. W. Allston. The maintenance of his collection of madeira held such a high priority for him that it featured in his business correspondence. He worked through his factors in Charleston, the firm of Lewis and Robertson, to perform a wide range of transactions. They sold his rice for him, served as an intermediary with his bank, paid his bills and taxes, and saw to the shipping of purchases to his estate. Lest we forget the system on which it all rested, they also aided him in buying and selling enslaved people. Folded in with these essential elements of the rice business are many transactions for wine. A single year’s correspondence shows the process of giving, ordering and collecting wine.

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<sup>19</sup> It’s worth noting, that the demarcation of in- and out-groups is the double-edged sword of commensality. MENNELL, MURCOTT and OTTERLOO, 1992, «Conclusion: Commensality and Society», p. 117. HANCOCK, 2009, *Oceans of Wine* [...], p. 390.

<sup>20</sup> GEERTZ, 1973, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> GEERTZ, 1973, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, pp. 4-10.

We «received the 2 doz Sercial wine», they noted on 7 February 1837, apparently in a gift or a trade. In May, they informed Allston, «Your wine in conjunction with the Govr [sic] has been ordered.» On 20 June, after informing him of the details and context for the sale price of some of his rice, they wrote, «Your wine has arrived £120 pr pipe, or £60 a Half Pipe this must be something extra. We will send it up [...] and Gover Butlers we will also send as you direct.» In the English system a pipe is 126 gallons, or 486 liters, of wine. To understand that as pours of madeira (usually smaller than the United States standard pour of five ounces or 120 mil in Europe), that is 3,225 glasses of madeira<sup>22</sup>.

Where was all that wine going? Some of it, at least, Allston used as cultural capital with which to impress his guests and associates. As Bourdieu's framework illuminates, Allston used cultural capital and social capital interchangeably by giving wines as gifts, trading with fellow aficionados, and partnering with his elite peers. Thanks to an inventory of Allston's wine room at his plantation Chicora Wood, made sometime after 1856, we know he ordered that wine to be split with four other leading planter-politicians. First was Pierce M. Butler, a fellow planter, and banker who was in the first year of his term as Governor. Second was «Ward», one of Allston's neighbors, belonging to a family who owned multiple rice plantations in Georgetown County. The third partner in this «fine nutty Madeira», Wade Hampton II, was one of the wealthiest planters in the whole South, with thousands of acres of land in South Carolina, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, and North Carolina. He was also a recently elected member of the state senate. Allston served in the state senate in 1837, too, and would be elected governor in 1856. He still owned «11 dozen» [bottles?] of this particular wine at the time of his election and referred to it as the «Govr's wine.»<sup>23</sup> Dining with these men, and sharing special wine with them, cemented Allston's relationships with important men in his sphere.

Through Allston, the oenophile, the comingling of commensality and cultural capital are on display, especially through his membership in the Hot and Hot Fish Club. This club of self-styled «rice barons» all owned plantations and hundreds of

<sup>22</sup> EASTERBY, 2004, *The South Carolina Rice Plantation As Revealed In The Papers of Robert F. W. Allston*, pp. 384-411, 440-441. The pipe was long a standard measure of liquids, mainly wine, in Britain. A pipe is the equivalent of a butt. Madeira most often arrived on the West side of the Atlantic world in pipes. It is the same as two hogsheads. ZUPKO, 1985, *A Dictionary of Weights and Measures for the British Isles*, «Pipe», pp. 302-304.

<sup>23</sup> EASTERBY, 2004, *The South Carolina Rice Plantation As Revealed In The Papers of Robert F. W. Allston*, pp. 384-411. For brief biographies of three of the four shares owners see, from the *South Carolina Encyclopedia*: RICHARDS, 2016, «Butler, Pierce Mason». ANDREW, 2016, «Hampton, Wade II». PLAAG, 2016, «Allston, Robert Francis Withers».

enslaved people in a region of South Carolina known as the Waccamaw Neck. The Waccamaw Neck is a peninsula of land with the Waccamaw River on one side and the Atlantic Ocean on the other ending at Winyah Bay, where several other rivers join the Waccamaw. This was where the small port of Georgetown sat.

Part of the social scene of the Waccamaw Neck was The Hot and Hot Fish Club, a gathering of upper-class men. The Club existed from some time prior to 1812 and ended as a result of the Civil War in 1861. Across those fifty or more years, the club focused on several things: fishing as sport and recreation, epicurean pleasures, and commensality, which they enshrined in their rules as «the cultivation of friendly relations.» In 1860 Allston penned a short remembrance of the club, which initially met in a small shack on Drunken Jack Island near Murrell's Inlet. Storms and other vagaries caused the club to move into a number of clubhouses over the decades, ending with a much nicer structure in the 1850s near Pawley's Island<sup>24</sup>. This rural club for gentlemen reflected some of the styles of Anglophone elites, but with a local flavor. They had a billiards table much as one might find in a Gentlemen's club in London or New York. Members came together to hunt game, to fish in the local creeks in the inlet for the day, and then to dine and drink together. The club's unusual name—Hot and Hot—was a local vernacular, possibly even attributed to a single member or cook, as a way of describing the arrival of the fish courses from the kitchen heat.

Many of the club's rules involved required commensal celebration. For example, rule XIV required that if a member should be elected to statewide office, he «shall for each and every such compliment, furnish for the use of the club one box of champagne.» Allston had to do just that when he won the governorship in 1857. Most other moments of celebration, such as marriage or having a child, also required the fortunate member to supply champagne to the club, too. Aside from these sparkling celebrations, however, social beverages were never left to chance, as each member was required to bring at least one bottle of wine to each Friday gathering. With this club we have a highly masculine setting made up of wealthy holders of humans in bondage. Some of their bondsmen paddled their boats, cleaned the fish, and even cooked for them, but again, were all male. The markers of class and gender, then, were inescapable. Even as they gestured toward some equality among themselves with the club's rules, the members of the club they believed they sat far above much of South Carolina society<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> HARWELL, 1947, «The Hot and Hot Fish Club of All Saints Parish», pp. 40-47.

<sup>25</sup> HARWELL, 1947, «The Hot and Hot Fish Club of All Saints Parish», pp. 42-47.

## Thinking Further about Cultural Capital

That cultural capital accrues through the ownership of wines that have substantial material cost to purchase is easily understood, but other aspects of owning and consuming madeira made it particularly appealing as cultural capital. Connoisseurship—the possession of expertise, rare skills or specialist knowledge in an area like the selection, handling and serving of wine—brings with it greater cultural capital. Collecting madeira took economic capital, but it also took effort in the sense of ordering the wine through dealers (often multifunction agents called factors in the South). It took an additional combination of money and knowledge to store the wines in the long term. It is important to understand that madeira drinkers often bought the wine in wooden stave barrels containing hundreds of gallons. This madeira was not always bottled; they poured wine directly into decanters to serve it. In other cases, having determined that the proper moment in a wine's development had arrived, they might bottle the entirety of a container. In still other cases, someone might take manipulation of wine even further, as best seen in the case of William Neyle Habersham.

Habersham, a life-long resident of Savannah, can be seen as the model nineteenth-century madeira connoisseur in the United States. Born in 1817, he finished his education at Harvard in 1836 and died in 1899. He managed the trading business his father started in 1744, Robert Habersham's Son & Co. The business traded rice from the low country of Georgia and South Carolina to Europe. On their return trips they «brought back Spanish and Madeira wines in ballast.»<sup>26</sup> Their business sold many of the wines, but first Robert, and then William also, became collectors. In fact, the word "collector" may not fully capture William's role and ultimate reputation. In this case, we know some of how and through whom Habersham's legendary notoriety spread. Ward Macallister, who had Savannah roots but spent his adult life in New York's wealthiest and most elevated social circles—dubbed «the four hundred» by McAllister himself—helped establish «the New York reputation of the Habersham collection.»<sup>27</sup> McAllister both wrote about and talked about Habersham, extending

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<sup>26</sup> ARNOLD, 1900, «Catalogue of Madeiras and Sherries Belonging to the Estate of the Late William Neyle Habersham, ESQ.» Jones Family Collection, Georgia Historical Society.

<sup>27</sup> MCALLISTER, 1911, *Society as I Have Found It*, pp. 271-272. McAllister's fame has had a modest resurgence in recent years with the advent of the HBO television series, *The Gilded Age*, in which the noted actor Nathan Lane plays the historical Ward McAllister. See *The Gilded Age* at IMDB, available at <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4406178/>.

his fame around madeira. The US Civil War effectively brought an end to the trading firm, and Habersham also lost both of his sons to battle wounds. During the last three decades of his life, he tended his collection of wines, making a living by selling them to madeira lovers up and down the eastern seaboard of the United States. When he died, the New York auction of his remaining collection totaled nearly 900 gallons of madeira (to say nothing of several hundred gallons of sherry)<sup>28</sup>.

Collectors often had special facilities for storing their wines. In the attic of Habersham's house, he had a garret wine room. As madeira wines often profited from warm or even hot aging, madeira garrets suited the circumstances well. Additionally, low-lying, flooding-prone port cities such as Savannah, New Orleans and Charleston made cellars impractical. David Hancock points out that this method of storage is uniquely American. One may regard Habersham's garret as a place to preserve and gently age wine, but the skills he employed went beyond what is characterized as cellaring for most wines. That is, he did more than maintain his vintage madeiras: as a container got used up, the lees, the sediment-rich bottom of the barrel or bottle, were left. Habersham kept them and made his own blends. The estate auction labeled these as «Blend of Sundry Fine Madeiras», «Blend of Fine Old Madeiras» and «Lees of Fine Old Madeiras.» In making his own blends Habersham exercised his palate and his knowledge of blending and aging wine. In short, he put his cultural capital on display. One hint that the display proved effective is that a type of madeira, Rainwater Madeira, was at one time apocryphally credited to him as the inventor<sup>29</sup>.

David Hancock observed other areas in which madeira connoisseurs demonstrated their taste. Cellaring was but one way, and there were even clearer methods, such as using custom labels. As Hancock put it, «the often-expensive labels became a field of competition.»<sup>30</sup> Silver makers and English China manufacturers such as Wedgwood sold ceramic generic labels but would customize them with the purchaser's name or monogram, too. The means of displaying cultural capital, then, extended from the wines to the appurtenances associated with drinking them, from bottles to decanters, from labels to glassware. Madeira wine offered these and other

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<sup>28</sup> See also TUTEN, 2005, «Liquid Assets: Madeira Wine and Cultural Capital among the Lowcountry Planters, 1735-1900», pp. 173-188.

<sup>29</sup> ARNOLD, 1900, «Catalogue of Madeiras and Sherries Belonging to the Estate of the Late William Neyle Habersham, ESQ.» Jones Family Collection, Georgia Historical Society. Hancock shows that as early as the 1730s in one instance, and around the Anglophone West Indies and in Charleston by the middle of the eighteenth century, the wealthy began outfitting houses with wine garrets. HANCOCK, 2009, *Oceans of Wine* [...], p. 359.

<sup>30</sup> HANCOCK, 2009, *Oceans of Wine* [...], p. 362.

opportunities to show one's cultural capital, even as the drinkers enjoyed each other's company and the wine itself<sup>31</sup>.

## Madeira in the Twentieth Century

Twin attacks on the European wine industry affected madeira wine in the nineteenth century. The *oidium* fungus, called powdery mildew, arrived in Portugal in the 1840s followed by the vine louse, *phylloxera*, near the end of the century. Madeira's vineyards suffered extensively from these invasive species from the Americas. One consequence of these threats to the wine industry was a belief that the wines produced after oidium and phylloxera were inferior to those previously produced. English journalist, critic and epicurean George Saintsbury, in his celebrated 1920 work *Notes On A Cellar Book*, offered something of a eulogy for madeira wine. «It may seem irreverent to give so famous, and at its best so exquisite, a liquor as Madeira merely a postscript», Saintsbury wrote in his chapter on sherry, «which [madeira] had itself supplanted.» Acknowledging how sherry and madeira had swapped places of prestige as types of wine, he continued, «I know no wine of its class that can beat Madeira when at its best.» However, from the vantage point of the early twentieth century, he wrote, «I fear that the very best Madeira is, and always has been since the pre-oidium wines were exhausted, mainly a memory.» Thoroughly displeased with the wines produced and aged in the late nineteenth century, Saintsbury uncharitably categorized them as «degenerate successors» of the wines that came before<sup>32</sup>.

Saintsbury's views were shared by a number of connoisseurs in the twentieth century. It resulted in two divergent paths. Down one path, the most heavily trodden path, went most wine drinkers, who abandoned madeira in favor of other wines. The alternate path, a narrow route, attracted those who would not give up on madeira, and they focused on collecting the ever-rarer vintages from the pre-*phylloxera* period. The combined traumas to the islands' wine industry and the decline of planter elites in the US South did much to bring down the status of madeira wine. Prohibition in the United States from 1920 to 1933 relegated the wine to an afterthought for most drinkers. On the other hand, the rareness of pre-*phylloxera* vintages and the historical amnesia of many drinkers in the twentieth century also served to make knowledge of

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<sup>31</sup> HANCOCK, 2009, *Oceans of Wine* [...], pp. 362-384.

<sup>32</sup> SAINTSBURY, 2008, *Notes On A Cellar Book*, pp. 1-5, 59-60. On oidium and phylloxera, BÖHM, s.d., «The American Plagues».



madeira alluringly esoteric to a small number of dedicated collectors. That exclusivity meant they could retain both some cultural and some economic capital. There are a number of sources of evidence for this, including successful high-end auctions for madeira wines in the late twentieth century and into the present century and the specific example of the Madeira Club of Savannah, Georgia.

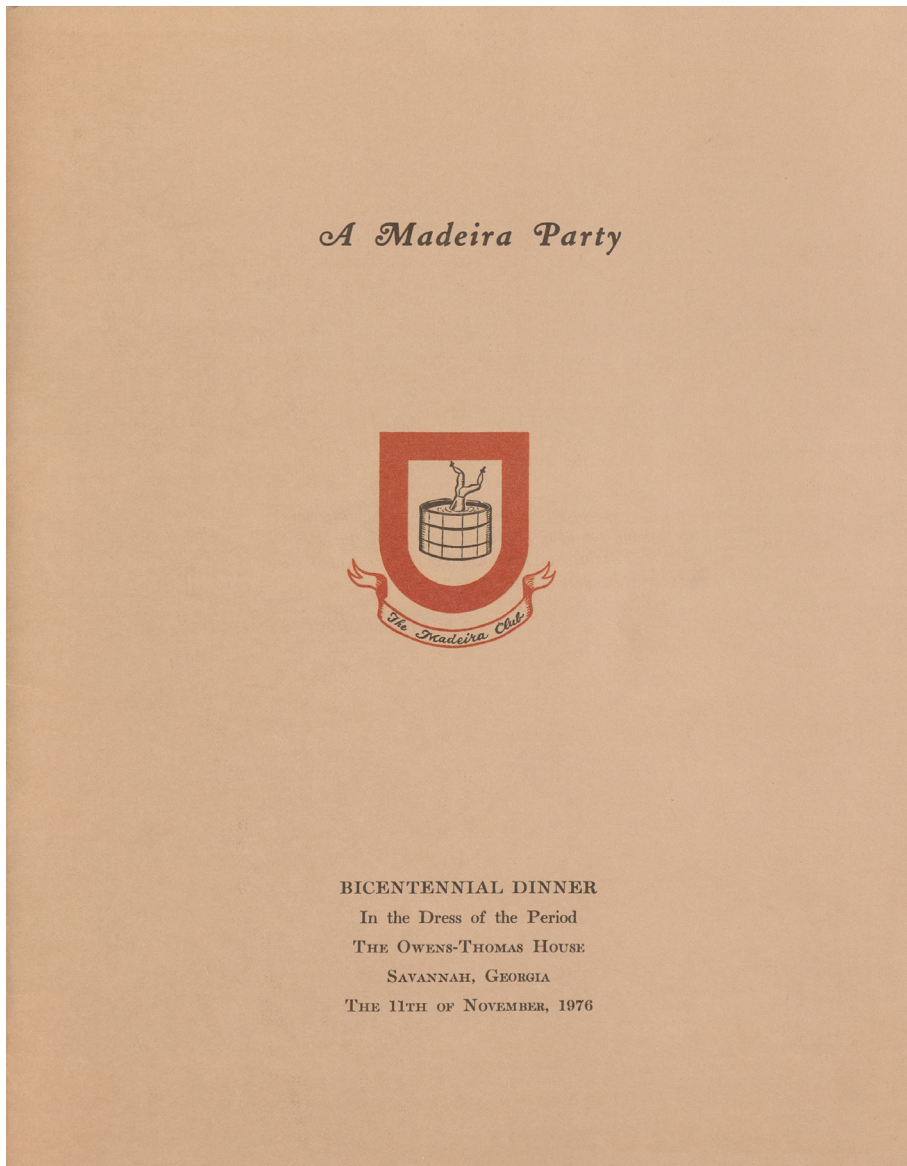
The members of the Madeira Club of Savannah, founded in 1950, understood not only the cultural capital associated with knowledge and consumption of the wine, but with continuing a tradition in keeping with elite men of the past. In fact, the Savannah club men were well aware of their predecessors, much as we saw in the *Madeira Party* that took place a century earlier and more than 1100 kilometers to the north. S. Weir Mitchell's group, whom we met at the beginning of this essay, went by the name The Biological Club, and was also known as the Madeira and Terrapin Club. The Madeira Club of Savannah took pride in reviving the custom of dressing for dinner in tuxedos, because «formal dress would promote formal behavior.» The official history of the organization claims they chose the name first «because of Savannah's involvement in the early history of Madeira and Madeira having been a favorite» wine<sup>33</sup>. Secondly, they acknowledged William Neyle Habersham and the notoriety for Madeira connoisseurship he gained for the city of Savannah beyond the state of Georgia. As wealthy and privileged men, the members took turns presenting papers at each meeting and enjoying «Madeira wine [...] with at least one course.» They even had a logo created that, drawing upon Shakespeare, «depicts the Duke of Clarence drowning in a butt of Madeira wine.» From the club's extensive records, which they began depositing at the Georgia Historical Society in the 1970s, they thought a good deal of themselves and the club. They also thought quite a lot of the rare and expensive wines they tasted. Those included a bottle rescued from a shipwreck where the Savannah River meets the sea. Another club party, written about by noted wine expert Michael Broadbent, featured a famous 1792 Solera from Blandy's. This example was only moved from cask into bottle in 1957. With that bottling Blandy's took part in the celebration of a royal arrival in Madeira by the English monarch, Queen Elizabeth II. Broadbent described the wine in detail concluding, «soft yet intense, beautifully balanced with excellent finish and—the hallmark of a great Madeira—an ethereally lingering after-taste.»<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> KELLY, 23 January 1991, «The First Forty Years of the Savannah Madeira Club, 1950-1990», unpublished manuscript. Madeira Club Collection, Georgia Historical Society, pp. 1-22.

<sup>34</sup> KELLY, 23 January 1991, «The First Forty Years of the Savannah Madeira Club, 1950-1990», unpublished manuscript. Madeira Club Collection, Georgia Historical Society, pp. 5-22.

Image 2 – Logo of the Savannah Madeira Club



Credits: The Madeira Club. A Madeira Party: Bicentennial Dinner. 11 November 1976. GHS 0983 Madeira Club Collection. GHS 0983-001-002-0001. Georgia Historical Society.

Like William Neyle Habersham, Mills B. Lane, Jr. was a native of Savannah, Georgia and born into a prominent business family. Lane, born in 1912, took his education at Yale and returned to Georgia to work in the C&S Bank, a rising enterprise founded by his father. Lane took helm of the company's Atlanta headquarters just after the Second World War. He grew the bank into «the largest bank in the South and the most

profitable among the 50 largest banks in the nation.»<sup>35</sup> Along the way, he played an instrumental role in the politics of Atlanta and helped broker desegregation both in that city and Savannah. Lane also enjoyed commensality and practiced cultural capital. Aware of the history of his native town and its ties to madeira wine, he began to collect bottles with other *bon vivants*, and joined the Savannah Madeira Club.

Lane joined the organization in 1974 and brought new energy to it; as the club history records, Lane «was a most enthusiastic member.» Lane, a true madeira connoisseur, went so far as to supply the club with wine until he died. Drawing upon his own financial success in banking and his passion for old madeira, Lane helped the club host tastings of vintage examples. In 1976, as part of honoring the national Bicentennial, the club's «affair was patterned after» Mitchell's *Madeira Party*, again making evident those self-conscious connections of cultural capital between elites across time and space. For example, as in Mitchell's book, only men attended the party. The event took place on Armistice Day, 11 November, with the members appearing in «Dress of the Period», meaning the era of the War for Independence, not Mitchell's time. The party took place at the Owens Thomas House, an 1819 mansion in the city that served as a house museum by the time of the Bicentennial. They served the «traditional meal of terrapin soup and Mallard duck» along with «five rare madeiras.» Thus, the club members paid homage to both the Declaration of Independence and Mitchell's book about madeira aficionados in the same event<sup>36</sup>.

Mills Lane Jr. died in 1989. At a meeting of the club following Lane's death, his son «Mills IV presented each Club member with a gift of four bottles of old madeira wine from his father's stock.» The following year, in keeping with Lane's will, Christie's auctioned Lane's holdings, labeling the sale as «A Magnificent Collection of Finest and Rarest Madeira.» The auction took place at their London rooms in June 1990. At the time of his death, Lane's collection included bottles ranging in origin from 1792 to 1880 and ranging across the grape types from Bual and Malmsey to Sercial, Terrantez and Verdelho. That oldest bottle demonstrates the layers of history that weigh on madeira and how madeira wine can carry a nearly unique degree of cultural capital. The label noted «Blandy's Bual 1792 vintage bottled 1840. Property of Napoleon I and Mills B. Lane.» The Christie's catalogue tasting notes went far beyond flavors in this

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<sup>35</sup> FOWLER, 10 May 1989, «Mills B. Lane Jr., Atlanta Banker, Is Dead at 77», Section D, p. 28 and HATFIELD, 2021, «Mills B. Lane Jr.».

<sup>36</sup> KELLY, 23 January 1991, «The First Forty Years of the Savannah Madeira Club, 1950-1990», unpublished manuscript. Madeira Club Collection, Georgia Historical Society, pp. 1-16. For more on the Richardson-Owens-Thomas House see the Telfair Museums authority which manages the property; available at <https://www.telfair.org/visit/owens-thomas/>.

case to provide the provenance for this «most famous madeira of all.» The story was full of drama. As the British Navy took Napoleon Bonaparte into exile on St. Helena Island in 1815, the ship *Northumberland*, in keeping with British maritime tradition, made a call on Funchal, Madeira. There, the British Consul-General «persuaded the deposed Emperor to take with him a pipe of 1792 madeira.» Napoleon never drank it, and the Blandy family regained possession of it following his death, when those responsible for disposing of Napoleon's possessions returned the wine to the island. In 1840, the Blandy establishment, now in the hands of new generation, bottled the pipe with the label that it had once been the property of Napoleon. In the late twentieth century, how could one signal deeper knowledge, more elevated taste and a greater ability to interact with history than to own a madeira once the property of the Emperor of France?<sup>37</sup>

Although old madeiras have become quite rare in the Anglophone world, the dispersal of Mills Lane's collection did not represent an end to the America interest in the wine. In 2015, during a major renovation of the historic home of Liberty Hall in Union County, New Jersey, carpenters reopened a closed-off cellar room and found a garret madeira space complete with madeira, along with bottles of gin and bourbon. Liberty Hall has long been a museum house now run by Kean University, but its owners and visitors included the likes of New Jersey's first elected executive, Alexander Hamilton, and other United States founding fathers. The museum conferred the collection of thirty-six bottles and four demijohns of wine to the auction house Christie's for sale. Wisely, the auctioneers had an expert taste some and offer his notes, as well as authenticating the quality of the wine. A demijohn of Sercial madeira from 1846 tasted of, «fudge, violets, straw, vanilla and vintage furniture wax», in the words of Christie's expert. That demijohn brought in \$36,200 at the auction in December 2018. A quart bottle of madeira from circa 1796 brought in \$15,925, too. That auction, almost in our own era, reminds us that the lure of madeira remains potent, even if only to a small if well-heeled group, and that we are more connected than we realize to the old Anglophone world of madeira appreciation<sup>38</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> CHRISTIE'S, s.d., «A Magnificent Collection of Finest and Rarest Madeira: From the Estate of Mills B. Lane, Jr., of Savannah.» Madeira Club Collection, Georgia Historical Society. His son was the IV because his brother had named a son Mills B. Lane, III. See HATFIELD, 2021, «Mills B. Lane Jr.».

<sup>38</sup> KOSTREWA, 25 April 2019, «Tasting a Madeira that Stood the Test of Time». SHULTZ, 17 October 2018, «Christie's to Offer 200-Year-Old Madeira Wine». MERCER, Chris, 11 December 2018, «Historic Madeira Bottling Fetches Nearly \$16,000 at Auction».

## Conclusion

The connoisseurs, collectors, traders and handlers of madeira wine in the Anglophone world shared a common interest. Their motivations for focusing on madeira cannot be fully determined, but they appear to be multi-causal: they enjoyed the flavor; they basked in the reflected glow of the cultural capital knowledge of and possession of madeira afforded them; they drank in company and experienced commensality. For elites of the plantation economy, the cultural capital displayed through their collection and consumption of madeira wine, besides being pleasurable, also gave evidence of their elite status. The positive reinforcement of being madeira drinkers, then, appeared to reward them often and plentifully. After all, as Ward McAllister, that supercilious Gilded Age figure, opined, madeiras were «the poetry of wine.»<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> MCALLISTER, 1911, *Society as I Have Found It*, p. 268.



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