

# THE STORY OF VIRGINIA: AN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

A Long-term Exhibition at the Virginia Historical Society

[http://www.vahistorical.org/sva2003/new\\_southerners.htm](http://www.vahistorical.org/sva2003/new_southerners.htm)

## New Southerners

After the [Civil War](#), Virginians embraced economic development and the new technologies that were revolutionizing everyday life. At the same time, however, they resisted political and social change, especially racial equality. As a result of this dichotomy, living standards improved and Virginia attained the highest income level of any southern state, but the political system became less democratic and society was rigidly segregated by race. This was the paradox of “The New South.”

## Reconstruction

As black slavery had been a chief cause of the Civil War, so black freedom was the main issue of Reconstruction. Radical Reconstruction by the Republican Congress happened first in Virginia. Gains for African Americans came rapidly in Virginia in the late 1860s, but Conservatives recaptured power sooner in Virginia than elsewhere. To be recognized fully by the federal government, however, Virginia had to enfranchise black men. With self-help and the ballot, blacks were able to advance their interests for two decades. The so-called Readjuster government of the early 1880s abolished the [whipping post](#)—a form of public punishment for blacks only—and favored “readjusting” Virginia’s prewar debt. Instead of repaying the full amount with interest, it freed funds for education and social needs.

The 1885 election of [Governor Fitzhugh Lee](#), [Robert E. Lee](#)’s nephew, however, inaugurated the heyday of the Confederate veteran in politics. One-party rule began, culminating in the 1902 constitutional convention that greatly reduced the number of eligible voters, especially blacks, other Republicans, and poor whites. Virginia politics came under the domination of Thomas S. Martin from his election to the U.S. Senate in 1893 until his death in 1919. The prohibition of intoxicating beverages was a major issue of his era, and was achieved in 1916. Then, from the 1920s to the 1960s, [Harry F. Byrd](#) virtually controlled Virginia politics.

For some eighty years black equality was not part of the vision of those who held positions of power in the state. In place of slavery, they erected a thoroughgoing system of second-class citizenship and rigid segregation. Economic opportunities for blacks were few. In rural areas they often were sharecroppers kept perpetually in a form of debt bondage. In cities they were largely confined to menial jobs and domestic service. Their housing, schooling, and medical care were inferior to that of whites. The 1910s and 1920s were especially bleak and saw the revival of the Ku Klux Klan and the adoption in Virginia of the Racial Integrity Act in 1924. Social segregation forced the black community to develop its own churches, [colleges](#), banks, newspapers, barber shops, beauty salons, funeral parlors, burial societies, and sports teams. Out of these institutions emerged a black middle class and role models for youth.

## Economic Recovery

But if the years after 1885 were a time of political stagnation and social regression, it also was one of vibrant economic change. The industrial revolution reached Virginia in full force. Although the commonwealth remained largely agricultural, many for the first time became employees in tobacco

factories, coal mines, and textile, flour, and lumber mills. Virginians actively sought the economic benefits that earning money outside of home production could bring. One of the most important industries was tobacco, which had been important to Virginia since 1612, but now the manufacture of tobacco products came to the fore as demand soared. By 1880 one-quarter of the workforce of Richmond and Petersburg was employed turning out a million pounds of smoking tobacco as pipes and cigars became popular.

Equally important was the coming of the railroad. The expansion of railroads in the late 1800s was critical to economic growth, enlarging the market for Virginia's agricultural produce, manufactures, and natural resources. Small towns sprang up along railroad lines. Roanoke (formerly Big Lick) became headquarters of the Norfolk & Western Railway, which connected the newly discovered coal fields of southwest Virginia to Norfolk and Newport News, which became two of the world's largest coal ports. The 1873 discovery of vast high-grade coal fields also transformed southwest Virginia from a hardscrabble, sparsely populated agricultural backwater into a booming, industrialized section. Mining, however, was dangerous work, especially before government set any safety regulations, and miners would become one of the few occupations in Virginia to be heavily unionized.

In the late 1800s, the coming of the machine age to Virginia coexisted with older, handicraft traditions. By about 1915, however, the postwar flood of mass-produced furniture from outside Virginia crowded out the village cabinetmaker, and the gunsmith and ironmonger followed suit. The disappearance of the blacksmith would take longer, until internal combustion automobiles, trucks, and tractors largely replaced horses and mules by the 1930s. One old Virginia tradition persisted in spite of repeated efforts to suppress it—moonshining—distilling liquor without paying excise taxes. Those charged with collecting the taxes and destroying illicit stills were called revenueurs. Prohibition, which began in Virginia in 1916 and nationwide in 1919, made moonshining even more profitable. By 1923, Virginia was the third largest moonshining state.

## Continuity and Change

Another continuity with the antebellum era was the predominance of agriculture. Despite the growth of industry and commerce, 85 percent of Virginians in 1900 still lived in rural areas, mostly on farms. Farmers suffered from economic downturns in 1873, 1893, and throughout the 1920s and 1930s, until war broke out in Europe in 1939. Although railroads had expanded the market for Virginia products, farmers were at the mercy of high railroad freight charges, fluctuating commodity prices, and periodic droughts. Unlike today, many farmers were African American. In the 1930s they produced 30 percent of Virginia's tobacco and corn, 50 percent of its cotton, and 60 percent of its peanuts. But change came to the farms, too. The use of horses and mules gave way to steam- or gas-powered tractors, while machines such as the peanut picker reduced the need for stoop labor. Life remained hard for both man and beast, however, until electricity reached rural areas at the end of the 1930s and in the 1940s.

The Great Depression of the 1930s hit Virginia hard, but not as hard as more industrialized northern states. The [Byrd Organization](#) was philosophically opposed to much of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. Nonetheless, state Democrats were willing to accept federal money for such public works projects as the Colonial and Blue Ridge Parkways, the Skyline Drive, and Shenandoah National Park.

Another aspect of society that changed drastically at this time was education. In colonial Virginia, education had been a private matter for those who could afford it, not a right for everyone. There were no publicly financed schools. Teaching slaves was considered even worse and was made illegal. The wealthy did, however, favor creating institutions of higher learning, and the American Revolution raised the importance of education beyond all imagining. Consequently, a number of colleges had been founded in the commonwealth in the early nineteenth century—the University of Virginia, Washington College, Randolph-Macon College, and the Virginia Military Institute. By 1840, the state was the equal or superior of most states and many nations in higher education for young men. Below that level, however, the story was increasingly dismal.

Immediately following the Civil War, formal schools for newly freed black men and women were opened by northern churches, philanthropic groups, and the Freedmen's Bureau. Generally, northern teachers—white and black—taught in these schools. The Reconstruction Constitutional Convention of 1867–68 mandated a statewide system of free, state-funded schools, for blacks and whites. By 1871 most localities had operational public school systems—racially segregated to minimize controversy. The focus was primary education. Virginia had only a handful of true high schools before 1906. The quality of teaching and level of funding were inadequate, and black schools received the least of both. For all its flaws, however, the public school system of the late 1800s was a major, if incomplete, step in the commonwealth's path to modernity.

## Streetcars to Automobiles

A conspicuous symbol of modernity in Virginia's cities was the electric streetcar. In May 1888, Richmond became the first city in the world to have a fully operational electric streetcar system. Success in Richmond revolutionized transport in cities across the globe. Within fifteen years, 20,000 miles of streetcar tracks were laid in the United States alone. If streetcars were symbols of the new, progressive Virginia, however, they also became daily reminders of Virginia's system of racial degradation. A 1906 law required black Virginians to sit at the back of all public transit vehicles. Conductors now had to decide a person's race at a glance, sometimes resulting in fights or lawsuits, and visitors to Virginia were puzzled as to where to sit. Blacks decided to boycott the streetcars. These efforts failed but contributed to the emergence of a strategy of resistance more assertive than that counseled by Virginia-born [Booker T. Washington](#). An unanticipated but ultimately important effect of the streetcar on race relations was the emergence of suburbs. For the first time it was possible to work in a city but live outside it. Streetcars inadvertently fostered segregation by race and economic class.

Within fifteen years of their appearance, however, electric streetcars would be doomed by a new means of transport that completely reshaped the commonwealth—the automobile. Wood & Meagher built a prototype gasoline-propelled motor carriage in Richmond in 1896, but no manufacture of vehicles was attempted. Richmond Iron Works produced its first "Virginian" in 1910, began manufacture in 1911, and closed in 1912, the same year in which the "[Kline Kar](#)" relocated from Pennsylvania to Richmond. About 2,500 Kline Kars were produced before the company closed in 1923, one of a thousand makers that succumbed to the mass production techniques of Detroit giants such as Ford. Although the vast majority of cars in Virginia before 1923, and all of them afterward, were made elsewhere, the automobile transformed the commonwealth nonetheless.

Autos, however, require good highways, which Virginia did not have. In 1910 the speed limit on Virginia's country roads was 20 m.p.h. In cities it was 8 m.p.h. Roads were so bad that in 1921 a national automobile association advised motorists to detour the entire state if possible. As late as 1926, the only long-distance hard-surfaced road was the Staunton-Winchester Turnpike that had been built before the Civil War. That year, however, marked a new beginning with the inauguration of [Harry F. Byrd, Sr.](#) As governor from 1926 to 1930 he orchestrated an unprecedented spurt of road-building. From having a mere 4,000 miles of paved roads in 1918, Virginia had 47,000 miles by 1940 (and 65,000 today). The improved highway network vastly expanded intrastate and interstate trade, fostered the suburbanization the streetcars had begun, made possible a greatly enlarged tourism industry, and empowered ordinary Virginians. One woman claimed that it was not the vote that had made her independent but her car.

## Revolutions in Technology and Communications

Other technologies also were revolutionizing women's lives. New appliances that reduced housework enabled some women to work outside the home in factories and mills. Some found work as typists and telegraph operators. Technology also reduced the need for domestic servants. Electric lighting came first. The most important labor-saving devices—electric washing machines, vacuum cleaners, and refrigerators—came in the 1920s. Virginia's urban homes and offices had begun to be electrified after

1900, but few farms had electricity until the end of the 1930s. City living became increasingly attractive, and no group made the transformation from rural to urban dwellers more completely than black Virginians. Though some went to Virginia's cities, many left the state entirely for northern cities. As a result, the commonwealth's black population percentage dropped to a level not seen since 1700.

During these same years, from 1865 to 1940, there was a communications revolution that caused the United States to become a single mass market. The telephone was invented in 1876, and service began in Richmond in 1879 and in Norfolk in 1881. The phonograph debuted in 1878 and motion pictures in 1895. In the 1890s the halftone printing process made it possible to reproduce photographs in magazines. Radio became widely available in the 1920s. These innovations lessened rural isolation and broke down state and regional distinctions. The industries they spawned operated nationally. Increasingly, people of all states bought the same phonograph records, watched the same films, heard network radio programs, read the same mass-produced magazines and syndicated comic strips, and were seduced by the same national advertisers.