

THE STORY OF VIRGINIA: AN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

A Long-term Exhibition at the Virginia Historical Society

http://www.vahistorical.org/sva2003/new_virginia.htm

Becoming a New Virginia

World War II set in motion forces that eventually transformed Virginia. In 1945, however, much of Old Virginia remained. Cartoonist Fred Seibel's personification of the state was "the colonel," a presumed Confederate veteran, dressed in a white suit, and with a white goatee. The fact that the commonwealth usually was referred to as Old Virginia or the Old Dominion hinted at the continued supremacy of traditional values and beliefs. Among these were a code of honorable conduct—the Virginia gentleman—a tradition of gracious hospitality, a Jeffersonian political culture that favored decentralized power, as well as less pleasant features such as America's own apartheid system in which status was fixed and immutable and everyone knew his place.

Romantic View of Virginia

The public image of Virginia in 1945 was little different than it had been fifty years earlier. In the 1880s and 1890s Thomas Nelson Page had glorified the pre-Civil War South, especially Virginia, in a series of popular novels. More than anyone else of his generation, he was responsible for creating the stereotype of a golden age of harmonious plantation life and honorable living unstained by material concerns. At the same time, author Ellen Glasgow began a career that looked "beneath social customs, beneath the poetry of the past, and the romantic nostalgia of the present."

It was the romantic view of Virginia, however, that got into the mass popular culture of the first half of the 1900s. Many songs were written about Virginia and disseminated through sheet music. Most of them were penned along New York City's "Tin Pan Alley" by men who had never been to Virginia, but those written by Virginians were little better. In both, sentimental lyrics conjure up a Virginia of moonlight and magnolias, heavy with racial stereotyping of a degrading character, or else they were vapid compositions that could easily be retitled with the name of any state.

Virginia on the Silver Screen

Few Hollywood films were made with stories set in Virginia. One, *Brother Rat* (Warner Brothers, 1938), starred future president Ronald Reagan and his future wife Jane Wyman. It was a lighthearted but positive portrayal of life at Virginia Military Institute, where freshmen are called rats and alumni refer to each other for life as brother rats. *The Howards of Virginia* (Columbia, 1940) was based on a novel *The Tree of Liberty* by Elizabeth Page and followed a Virginia family in the American Revolution. It was corny even by 1940 standards, was a commercial flop, and confirmed studio executives in their prejudice against stories where people write with feathers. *Virginia* (Paramount, 1940) was a pale imitation of 1939's best picture, *Gone with the Wind*, right down to the Tara-style mansion. A light drama, it was replete with stereotypes of

Virginia as a land of hoop-skirted ladies, columned mansions, deferential blacks, and fox hunting gentlemen.

The best of the lot was *The Vanishing Virginian* (MGM, 1941), based on an autobiographical novel by Rebecca Yancey Williams. Set in Lynchburg after the Civil War, it introduced such historical figures as Gen. Jubal Early, Mr. “Chillie” Langhorne, father of Lady Astor, and Carter Glass. The dust jacket referred to “one of the most gracious and carefree periods in our American life” and, patronizingly, to the “ever refreshing colored servants.” It was a conventional depiction of old Virginia, but it was also about change because it frankly recognized, albeit with regret, the irrevocable passing of an era.

A generation later, amid the turmoil of the Vietnam War and Watergate, Americans would find solace in a nostalgic evocation of life in Virginia in the 1930s. “The Waltons,” set in the Blue Ridge Mountains, ran on CBS Television from 1972 to 1981, and in re-runs ever since. The Waltons were a fictional family, but were based on the real experiences of writer Earl Hamner. The portrayal of southern life was idealized to be sure, but the transcendence of family values and virtues had strong appeal at a time of cultural disintegration.

Revolutions in Faith

In 1945 evangelical Protestantism still dominated the culture of both black and white Virginians. As early as the 1890s, however, some evangelicals, especially in Appalachia and on the Eastern Shore, rebelled against Baptist and Methodist churches, which they thought had become too conventional, too comfortable as part of the establishment. These people formed “Holiness” churches that emphasized visitations by the Holy Spirit, and they were the forerunners of modern Pentecostals.

In the early 1900s church-based political activism tended to favor progressive causes such as prohibition and social work. Black churches would become cornerstones of the civil rights movement. Seminarians frequently led lunch counter sit-ins, and Episcopal seminarian Jonathan Daniels, a VMI graduate, was killed in Alabama in 1965 for his role in promoting voting rights for blacks.

However, the perceived collapse of traditional values and beliefs in the 1960s led to a backlash so that, by the 1980s, most religiously based political activism in Virginia was on behalf of conservative causes. The nation’s two best-known religious conservatives were Virginians—Jerry Falwell, a Lynchburg fundamentalist who founded the Moral Majority—and Pat Robertson of Virginia Beach, a charismatic who founded the Christian Broadcasting Company and the Christian Coalition.

Yet, the world they faced was a new one. The religious profile of Virginia was far more diverse than ever before, not only from a greater Roman Catholic presence, but from the establishment in the commonwealth of Muslims, Buddhists, Mormons, and Hindus. The greatest threat, however, came from secularism and religious apathy. Stores would be open on Sunday. The state would sponsor gambling. Lent, which once suspended virtually all weddings and celebrations in Virginia, would go almost unobserved.

Revolutions in Education

The years since 1945 also have witnessed a revolution in education in Virginia. As late as 1950 the commonwealth ranked 47th of 48 states in the percentage of children actually enrolled in schools. [World War II](#), however, inaugurated a decades long influx of well-off newcomers who have demanded--and whose taxes have supported--quality schools.

After the fiasco of "[Massive Resistance](#)" ended, Governor Mills Godwin launched an ambitious program of educational modernization. One of his greatest achievements was creation of a community college system, a network of low cost, open admission, two-year colleges that brought higher education within the reach of thousands who previously found it impossible.

Moreover, 29 senior colleges and universities in the mid-1960s became 44 thirty years later. New universities such as Fairfax's George Mason rose to prominence. Such smaller schools as Harrisonburg's Madison College evolved into gigantic James Madison University. These schools were racially integrated by the mid-1970s and had become open to women. Indeed, most single gender schools in Virginia converted to co-education during this period. Generous state support enabled the commonwealth's flagship research universities—the [University of Virginia](#) and the College of William and Mary—to be consistently ranked among the best in the nation in their categories.

These improvements in higher education were paralleled by changes in primary and secondary education. By the 1990s, high school graduation rates and student performance on standardized tests were consistently above the national average. At the same time, however, American students, including Virginians, consistently ranked lower than students in many other countries. The educational debate changed from one of quantity—the number of schools, teachers, students being reached, and money being spent—to one of quality. What is being taught and what is being learned? Are graduation rates evidence of educational achievement, or are graduates entering the world undereducated, ill-prepared, and perhaps even functionally illiterate?

Cultural and Economic Transformations

Today, many more women work, and in far more varied careers, than in 1945. Many are executives, almost unimaginable then. Blacks no longer are confined to menial jobs and no longer are predominantly poor. Black millionaires, too, were inconceivable in 1945. The one party state and Democratic Solid South are long gone. Agriculture has a much diminished role. Tobacco is under attack. One of the largest components of the economy—at \$11.7 billion—is tourism. Much of that is heritage tourism to sites from Virginia's incomparable history. Another major industry is communications technology. Half of the world's Internet traffic passes through northern Virginia, and high-tech companies, combined with high-paying federal jobs, have made Fairfax the county with the highest average household income in the nation. Prosperity, however, is not spread evenly (nor ever has been). Many rural communities throughout the commonwealth are slowly dying. The bulk of Virginians live in suburbs, and a swath of Virginia from Fairfax to Stafford to Hanover to Chesterfield to Newport News to Virginia Beach has become part of the megalopolis that encompasses Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington.

The process of “becoming” is unending and change often is unsettling. As we become something new, we inevitably lose something of the old. Virginians, 46% of whom were born elsewhere, must decide what from the past to carry into the future. For example, the 1990s controversy about admitting women to Virginia Military Institute pitted a longstanding and apparently successful tradition against demands for a more inclusive society, especially at tax-supported institutions. Eventually, women were admitted. When the Disney Corporation proposed to build an American history theme park at Haymarket in Prince William County, some Virginians were thrilled at the recognition of Virginia’s historical primacy, and welcomed the anticipated economic benefits. Others, however, feared that the park would promote congestion and destroy the authentic landscape of the northern Piedmont. They banded together to stop it.

Many of the commonwealth’s recent controversies have dealt with race. The state song “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny,” although written by an African American, was dropped because it used such terms as “old darkey” and “massa and missus.” To date, no substitute has been chosen. Virginia is not among the states that flew the Confederate flag in recent years, but any recognition of the [Confederacy](#)—such as gubernatorial proclamation of Confederate Heritage Month—pits those determined to equate any mention of the Confederacy with Nazism against those who still think the Civil War was not about slavery.

Legacy and Change

More than sixty years ago philosopher Arnold Toynbee observed that the predominant characteristic of Virginia was resistance to change. Surveying those six decades, however, the remarkable thing is how much has changed nonetheless. Change is the only constant. Much of it has been for the better, some for the worse. Of course, not everyone agrees about which was which, but Virginians today are wealthier, healthier, better educated as a whole, more equal before the law, and better able to advance themselves based on individual merit, than ever before. The principles that [George Mason](#) set on paper in June 1776 continue to transform Virginia, America, and the world.