

THE STORY OF VIRGINIA: AN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

A Long-term Exhibition at the Virginia Historical Society

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Becoming Virginians

In 1610, Richard Rich declared that the English would “establish a nation where none before had stood”—conveniently forgetting about the native inhabitants. But Virginia never became the intended replica of England. Instead, a distinctive, hybrid culture emerged out of English, African, Indian, and later German and Scotch-Irish influences. Over a century and a half the colonists came to think of themselves as Virginians, a term formerly applied to the Indians.

English Rule in Early Virginia

Virginia in the 1600s and through most of the 1700s was an extremely inegalitarian society like the Stuart England that produced it. This was the result of conscious choice, largely the vision of one man—Sir William Berkeley—royal governor from 1642 to 1652 and from 1660 to 1677. When he assumed authority in Virginia, the colony was a society in flux in many ways. Sir William’s ideal society was authoritarian, like the one he had known at home. It would have a few ruling gentry families, a small class of yeomen farmers, a larger group of white tenant farmers, and at the bottom, numerous indentured servants (and eventually enslaved Africans). Social mobility would be at a minimum, and everyone would know his place. These plans were hindered by the staggering death rate in early Virginia, which made for a highly fluid, unstable society. But as death rates dropped in the late 1600s, and slaves replaced troublesome indentured servants, Berkeley’s goal was largely achieved. Thereafter, the colony was run by and for a small governing elite. This class ruled Virginia until after the American Revolution. Ironically, many scions of these dynasties would be the leaders in the rebellion against King George III.

Sir William Berkeley’s ideal society, however, needed not only a ruling class, but also a people to be ruled. Most of Virginia’s white immigrants were either indentured servants or convicts. In 1618 Virginia had adopted the headright, which gave fifty acres of land for each settler brought to Virginia. Although England’s unskilled and unemployed laborers had no money to pay the ship’s passage, it was paid for them if they signed an indenture or contract to become a servant for four to seven years. The fifty acres went to the man who actually paid their passage, not to the immigrants themselves. They came with few possessions, were examined like livestock, and worked under grueling conditions. Besides those who became servants voluntarily, convicts, prostitutes, and prisoners of war were forcibly “transported” from England to Virginia in large numbers.

Life in Early Virginia

In the 1600s, three-quarters of all English colonists experienced a term of servitude. Half of them died before their service was completed. One quarter remained poor afterward. The other quarter achieved a degree of prosperity. Even so, the raw conditions of society before 1690 permitted a degree of social mobility impossible in England. As a whole, women fared somewhat better than men. Because of the preponderance of men in early Virginia, wives were highly

prized. A female servant who had completed her service could easily find a husband, perhaps one of those fortunate servants who, having gotten fifty acres upon completing his service, had saved enough money for the legal fees, tools, seed, and livestock needed to become a planter (which then meant farmer).

Apart from [Pocahontas](#), women do not appear prominently in histories of early Virginia. Yet, in 1619, the General Assembly declared that “In a new plantation it is not knowne whether man or woman be the most necessary.” Women were central to the economy, producing not only necessities of life such as food and clothing, but also adding to the work force by bearing and raising children. In that age of inequality, however, women were seen as inferior to men in mind and body, and a woman’s duty was to find a man to govern her.

Slaves, servants, and mistresses of typical households worked from dawn to dusk grinding corn, milking cows, butchering meat, brewing beer (water was usually contaminated), growing vegetables, and washing and mending clothes. Slave women were as likely as men to be sent into the fields. Life was fleeting. Early Virginia was a land of widows, widowers, and orphans. Of necessity, men often made their wives their executors and legal guardians of their children. Daughters often were the only heirs. As colonists moved inland and acquired immunity to disease, the death rate dropped. But with increasing stability came a return to the ideal, and the ideal then was patriarch—the absolute authority of the husband and father. Thereafter, white women had few rights, free black women fewer, and slave women none.

Slavery

Within a few decades of Jamestown, Virginia was a society with slaves, but it was not yet a slave society. As late as 1640 there were more Africans in New England than Virginia. Only after the supply of European indentured servants declined in the late 1600s did tobacco planters turn increasingly to enslaved Africans. In the mid-1600s, before social and racial hierarchies hardened, the slave Anthony Johnson—the black patriarch of Pungoteague Creek on the Eastern Shore—could gain his freedom, acquire a farm, and own a slave himself. But, by the late 1600s, Virginia began passing laws that made hereditary slavery binding on Negroes, mulattoes, and some Indians.

Virginia slaves came from many different parts of Africa, where they spoke different languages. Once in the colony, they had to learn English to communicate with each other. But they developed a distinct dialect that became the vehicle of a unique culture. By 1776, African Virginians were 40 percent of the population. Various African cultural traditions, including food and cooking preferences, music, dance, vocabulary, religious and healing practices, and folklore mixed to form a new African Virginian culture that strongly affected white culture as well.

The Gentry Class

At the same time, slave labor made possible the emergence of a gentry class with a gracious lifestyle unimaginable to the first settlers at Jamestown. In the 1600s the high death rate had made the colonists, even the better-off ones, think in the short term. They built flimsy wooden houses without foundations, not one of which survives. By the mid-1700s, however, standards of gentility were rising rapidly. Benches and stools gave way to chairs. Dining replaced eating. Silver substituted for pottery. Walls or paneling were expected to have paintings or prints on them. There was a spate of mansion-building from the 1720s onward. Menokin was typical of the

more than three dozen mansions built in late colonial Virginia in imitation of the best architecture of Georgian England. It was built by John Tayloe, II, of Mount Airy, as a wedding present for his daughter Rebecca. She married Francis Lightfoot Lee, later a signer of the [Declaration of Independence](#). The couple's new house even contained a special purpose "dining room," a novelty, which was the most formal room of the house. This room was as large as the entire houses in which most Virginians then lived.

Cavaliers and Pioneers

By the mid-1700s the cavalier dynasties—founded mostly between 1650 and 1680—had become closely related through intermarriage. To prevent recurrence of a rebellion like [Bacon's](#), they reduced taxes on middling and poor white farmers and bribed them at election time. In return, yeomen farmers deferred to the gentry in politics.

In time, these Virginia gentlemen came to think of themselves as Virginians as well as Englishmen. Having largely governed the colony to their liking for a hundred years, they had come to see that arrangement as their right. Increasingly, the gentry resented the smallest interference from London in how they governed Virginia. These gentry rulers sat on the Governor's Council—the upper house of the legislature. They had awarded themselves huge tracts of frontier lands as settlement of Virginia moved inexorably westward in the 1700s. However, the gentry would make no money from these western lands unless they were actually settled. The Church of England's religious monopoly—so carefully defended by Governor Sir William Berkeley—was broken in order to attract foreign Protestants—Huguenots (French Calvinists), German Lutherans and Pietists, Scotch-Irish Presbyterians, Dutch Calvinists, the Swiss, and even Swedes. Virginia's rulers also calculated that these people would form a human shield protecting the Virginia heartland from the French and their Indian allies in the Ohio and Mississippi river valleys.

Frontiers and Outposts

After the last Anglo-Powhatan war ended in 1646, settlers had built forts at the fall line of the rivers—where they cease to be navigable. These forts became trading posts to which the Indian tribes and white trappers brought furs, beaver pelts, and deerskins tanned for leather. By 1674 the fur trade was second only to tobacco farming as a source of wealth. The high point of the trade was about 1704, when 34,387 deerskins and 2,841 beaver pelts were exported. The fall line forts also were launching points for exploration and settlement of the Piedmont, defined as the region between the fall line and the westward mountains. Migration mostly occurred up two river valleys—the James and the Rappahannock. The Randolph family established large plantations along the James River. Bollings, Carters, Pages, Flemings, Walkers, Meriwethers, Lewises, and Jeffersons all intermarried with the Randolphs and acquired large tracts. They moved up the James to the Rivanna and westward into a large area that was organized as Albemarle County.

Alexander Spotswood and the Shenandoah Valley

The Rappahannock River valley above the fall line was settled in a different way than the James. The largest role was played not by a family like the Randolphs, but by a single individual, Alexander Spotswood. As lieutenant governor of Virginia (the governor drew a large salary but never left England), Spotswood brought German miners to excavate iron ore found on his vast

holdings in the Rappahannock River basin. By 1727, settlement nearly had reached the Blue Ridge Mountains.

In 1716 Spotswood and a retinue he dubbed the Knights of the Golden Horseshoe penetrated the mountains into the Shenandoah Valley that lay between the Blue Ridge and Allegheny Mountains. Germans and Scotch-Irish flooded into the Valley from Pennsylvania. Winchester was founded in 1744, Staunton in 1748, and Strasburg and Woodstock in 1761. By the mid-1750s three counties had been established west of the Blue Ridge—Hampshire, Frederick, and Augusta—the last of which was then the whole southern valley.

Germans in Virginia

Who were these new Virginians, who had come into the colony not by sea, but down the Great Wagon Road from Philadelphia? The Germans were part of a migration of about 100,000 Protestants who came to British America between 1683 and 1775. They were fleeing war, conscription, ruinous taxes, and persecution. Initially, they sailed to Philadelphia, which welcomed religious heterodoxy. But as the good land west of Philadelphia was occupied, they drifted southwest through Pennsylvania and Maryland and, after 1730, into the northern Shenandoah Valley. They brought a distinctive culture with them.

By 1790, 28 percent of white Virginians were German-speaking. They often built stone houses with the kitchen as the principal room. They preferred stoves to fireplaces for heating. A distinctive diet included kraut, pfanhass (scrapple), and raisin pies. Food was served on stoneware with bright glazes. The German language was perpetuated in schools and churches. After 1800, Germans assimilated rapidly to English culture. The language soon died out, but other elements of the culture remain to this day. Generally, Germans were uncomfortable with slavery. To them, liberty meant their churches, communities, and families being left alone by government, which traditionally oppressed them.

The Scotch-Irish

The Germans had to share the Shenandoah Valley with another group, which followed on their heels ten years later. These were the Scotch-Irish. Between 1715 and 1775 perhaps 250,000 people from the northern parts of the British Isles came to British America. Most were Scotch-Irish (Scots settled in Northern Ireland—Ulster—after 1603), but there also were Irish as well as people on both sides of the Scottish-English border. They shared a heritage of living in disputed, unstable regions wracked by violence that bred warrior cultures. Not welcomed in eastern settlements, they hurried on their way west and began settling the Shenandoah Valley after 1740. Theirs became the dominant culture of the Appalachians from Pennsylvania to Georgia, partly by weight of numbers, but mostly because Old World border culture was exceptionally well suited to New World frontier conditions.

The Scotch-Irish largely leapfrogged the Germans and concentrated in the southern part of the Valley of Virginia. One leader was Col. James Patten, an ancestor of General George Patton (who embodied much of this culture). In 1745 Colonel Patten obtained 100,000 acres on the New, Holston, and Clinch rivers, drawing Scotch-Irish settlements into southwest Virginia.

Claiming the Land

The first land grants in the Northern Neck of Virginia—the peninsula between the Rappahannock and Potomac Rivers—were made in the 1650s. Among the early recipients was a royalist who came to Virginia—John Washington, great-grandfather of the future president. The Northern Neck was owned, however, by several English aristocrats who had received it in 1649 as a gift from the exiled young king Charles II. In the late 1600s the grants were consolidated by one family—the Culpepers—whose heiress married into the family of the lords Fairfax. Thomas, the sixth Lord Fairfax, defended his inheritance against the Virginia government, which disputed its size. The long case ended in Fairfax's favor in 1745. Lord Fairfax came to Virginia and, indeed, lived out his life here. Among his contributions was seeing promise in the teenager George Washington, whom he employed as a surveyor.

Winchester, the seat of Frederick County, served as a staging area for probes toward the Ohio Valley, one of which, on behalf of Northern Neck land speculators, precipitated the French and Indian War. In 1753, twenty-one-year-old George Washington was sent to the forks of the Ohio River (now Pittsburgh) to demand that the French evacuate the Ohio Valley, which Great Britain (through Virginia) claimed. The resulting incident triggered the French and Indian War, which after seven years ended in the expulsion of France from the mainland of North America. The new British king, George III, then tried to reserve the West beyond the Appalachians for the Indians, but the Virginians would have none of it. The Indians' response to repeated white incursions led to Lord Dunmore's War, named for Virginia's royal governor. The defeat of the Indians at Point Pleasant in 1774 opened up western Virginia (now West Virginia) and Kentucky (which was part of Virginia until 1792) to further settlement.

The vast migrations into Virginia in the 1700s had made it a multicultural society, one where ethnically and religiously diverse people had to learn to peacefully coexist. In the Piedmont and beyond, initial English ideas of toleration blossomed into new American ideals of freedom, which broke down the closed Virginia society of the 1600s, lessened Virginia's English identity, and laid foundations for the American Revolution.