Bookshelf

1991

[Introduction to] The Edge of the South: Life in Nineteenth-Century Virginia

Edward L. Ayers
University of Richmond, eayers@richmond.edu

John C. Willis

Recommended Citation

NOTE: This PDF preview of [Introduction to] The Edge of the South: Life in Nineteenth-Century Virginia includes only the preface and/or introduction. To purchase the full text, please click here.

The Edge of the South

Life in Nineteenth-Century Virginia

EDITED BY

EDWARD L. AYERS

AND

JOHN C. WILLIS

University Press of Virginia

CHARLOTTESVILLE AND LONDON

EDWARD L. AYERS

Introduction:
The Edge of the South

THE CHAPTERS IN THIS VOLUME EXPLORE DIVERSE SCENES of nineteenth-century Virginia: the big house and the slave quarters, small farms and battlefields, freed slaves in the country and freed slaves in the city, dark coal mines and brightly illuminated caverns, raucous political rallies and genteel meetings of the United Daughters of the Confederacy. Each essay offers a new perspective on a past which refuses to fit familiar ways of thinking about the nation and the South.

This book has its origins in the University of Virginia's graduate program in history. Beginning as explorations of discrete topics in social and political history, most of the essays started modestly as master's theses. Each author worked with historical materials close at hand, relying on the received wisdom of Southern history to make sense of manuscripts, newspapers, census reports, tax records, military documents, voting returns, and business ledgers in libraries, historical societies, and courthouses across the state. In each case, the evidence and the conventional categories of analysis failed to align in reassuring ways. Each author fashioned an argument which attempted to reconcile matters as effectively as possible, fulfilled the requirement, and went on with life. Some of the authors proceeded to become journalists, editors, and teachers, while others remained in academia.

As their disquieting discoveries accumulated, it began to seem that we might reverse the equation and use Virginia's unknown history to revise some of our basic assumptions about the South. The editors invited the authors, scattered from Connecticut to Texas, to revise their earlier work into chapters addressed to a larger readership. Some essays have been substantially condensed, some have been rethought entirely, and all have been buttressed with additional research. Yet their common theme reflects each author's independent discovery: nineteenth-century Virginia was seldom what we expected.

As the conclusion to this book argues, these studies of a Virginia which repeatedly appeared anomalous under close scrutiny urge us to reconsider some of our ideas about the South in general. Once we abandon the notion of a South whose history can be strung along some central theme or reduced to some lowest common denominator, we can see many "edges" throughout the region. Mississippi and Alabama, as well as Virginia and Missouri, had their own anomalies that the generalities of unified arguments cannot embrace. A central notion of this book is that we can learn as much about people in the past by looking at the parts of their experience that do not fit easy generalizations as we can by settling for reassuring coherence.

The ten chapters move across the entirety of the nineteenth century and across the face of Virginia. The story told here begins in the age of Jefferson and ends in the Progressive Era. During that century, Virginia changed as much as any state in America, beginning as the oldest slave society in the continental United States and evolving into a state altered by the deep economic and cultural ferment of the transatlantic industrial age. People in the mountainous southwest corner of the state or in the Shenandoah Valley witnessed as many changes as the more thoroughly studied Piedmont and Tidewater. Women experienced history no less than men, blacks no less than whites. Change came in the cultural realm as well as the economic and political, the personal as well as the public. Read consecutively, these chapters tell a story of Virginia in the nineteenth century quite different both from the state's official folklore and from historians' generalizations about the South as a whole.

Early in the nineteenth century, everything was tied to slavery. Visitors felt palpable differences between the plantation areas of Virginia and the states in the North, the overwhelming sense of a society built around slavery. The effect was heightened by the many faces of bondage in the Old Dominion. Unlike slaves in the deep South, few in Virginia labored on cotton plantations. Instead, they were scattered among tobacco fields and towns, wheat farms and oyster boats, coal mines and iron foundries. This diffused economic demand for the institution made slavery in nineteenth-century Virginia seem anachronistic, a relic from a different age. Yet slavery was everywhere.

If Virginia could seem old-fashioned, even antediluvian, from the perspective of the North, from the Southern point of view it could seem the face of the future. White Virginians had profited from slavery longer than any other Americans, repeatedly adapting the institution to the opportunities of a diversifying economy. These Virginians struggled with the justice and wisdom of slavery long before it took root in most of the cot-

ton states; they were creating elaborate rationalizations for bondage even as Virginia's excess slaves were being shipped to Alabama and Louisiana. The debates over the future of slavery in the Virginia legislature in 1831 and 1832 seemed to inoculate whites in the state against public anxiety and protest. A visitor to Virginia from the newer slave states might be struck at how malleable slavery was in the Old Dominion and how effectively it worked in a society of diverse agricultural and industrial enterprises. Virginia contained a number of cities where free blacks and hired slaves spent much of their time unsupervised by whites, where slaves labored in factories and commerce. But a white visitor might also wonder whether slaves so often out of the master's view would continue to endure enslavement. The Virginia slave debates had, after all, been triggered by the bloodiest slave revolt in United States history, and no one knew whether the newly legislated constraints on slaves and free blacks could prevent another outbreak.

Even as elite white Virginians struggled to domesticate slavery, they wrestled with more private concerns as well. Faced with complex and subtle changes in gender relations, elite Virginians at the beginning of the nineteenth century found themselves questioning traditional roles and attitudes. Members of this elite, after all, could draw on several different traditions. They might model themselves on the great Tidewater aristocrats from the golden age of the early eighteenth century, when imperious slaveowners built vast plantations and conducted themselves with the air of British gentry. They could also model themselves on the statesmen-planters of the Revolutionary War era, precariously balancing slaveholding and the latest Enlightenment philosophy. Or they could try to create a new cultural style, one specifically tailored to the new century.

The first chapter, by Melinda S. Buza, explores the creation of that new style, one that tried to reconcile the sentimental sensibilities of the early nineteenth century with a slaveholding society, one that tried to bring the male-dominated traditions of Virginia planters into line with evolving Anglo-American conceptions of women as moral paragons and centers of the household. The essay, with its focus on relationships within prominent Virginia families, shows the formation of a standard which soon spread throughout the slave South. Buza finds that the letters and diaries of these members of the Virginia gentry challenge the portrayal of the Old South as a land of sharp patriarchal authority. Instead, women and men worked to find emotional sustenance in a time of heart-wrenching mortality among mothers and children.

The slave quarters of the plantations where Buza's masters and mistresses lived saw different kinds of struggles. Although slaves enjoyed

far less latitude than whites, they too had to decide where to stand on matters of family, religion, and assertiveness. Slaves did not react uniformly to bondage. As John C. Willis shows, nineteenth-century slave quarters were divided between men and women, among generations, and between Christians and non-Christians, as each person grappled with the meaning of lifelong enslavement. While some embraced the promise of redemption, others spurned salvation in the hereafter for precedence in the present. The contest between honor and the values of Christianity in the slave quarters suggests that we might rethink the working of honor in the Old South, even as we rethink the way slaves approached Christianity.

The struggles in the manor and the quarters affected most white Virginians only indirectly, for the majority did not live on plantations before the Civil War. The typical white farmer ran a relatively small farm, perhaps with one or two slaves, perhaps hiring slaves from neighbors, perhaps with white tenants, perhaps with only the labor of his own family —a far cry from the fine plantations described in the first two chapters. In fact, the gap between yeoman farmers and the wealthier planters troubled Virginians. White Virginians no less than other Americans prided themselves on their freedom and political equality, and some worried that the concentration of wealth made possible by slavery mocked claims of equality, allowed planters to dominate their counties, engrossing the best land and relegating poorer neighbors to the margins. T. Lloyd Benson investigates these problems in a central Virginia county in the late antebellum era. Through a close examination of local records, he discovers complex spatial juxtaposition and intermingling of white classes, a portrayal which challenges easy conceptions of the social order in the antebellum South.

Virtually all the tensions and concerns Virginians held about their society came to the surface in the Civil War. Tied to the North by economic, kinship, and social connections, Virginia was reluctant to heed calls for Southern separatism. State leaders worked frantically to forestall conflict between the North and the South, even when other states had given up hope. One of the last states to secede, Virginia entered the Confederacy reluctantly. Yet some of the very attributes that set Virginia apart from the rest of the South—industrial cities and proximity to the North—also made it essential to the Confederacy's survival. The state that backed into the Southern cause so reluctantly found itself the capital and the industrial heart of the Confederacy. Richmond, with its large immigrant population, tobacco factories, and iron mills, was an unlikely focus for Southern nationalism, but such it became.

Virginia, as its leaders had feared, became the major battlefield of the

war. Union and Confederate armies cut across the state, stripping formerly prosperous farms and towns. Isolated and obscure courthouses, farms, and creeks became famous overnight and forever as the sites of horrible engagements. More than half the war's battles were waged within Virginia's borders. And as the conflict intensified, some white Virginians who had been skeptical of the Confederacy and the war abandoned their earlier reservations and became ardent supporters of the cause; others bitterly watched the state reap the fruit of the secession they had opposed and gave the cause only tenuous support. Ironically, the conflicting loyalties felt so acutely by Robert E. Lee and other Confederate soldiers later made their measured devotion to the Southern cause seem all the more noble. Lee's doubts and anxieties freed him from the stigma of fanaticism and imparted to his actions the serene dedication to duty that Virginians claimed as their special character.

Common men found their devotion to the cause challenged from the very beginning. If any of the soldiers in the Confederacy had reason to doubt their loyalty to secession and the war for Southern separation, surely it was Virginia's. Fighting so close to their homes, their families in constant danger of battle, scavengers, and hunger, many Virginia soldiers were tempted to desert. The unusual diversity of the state fed their temptation: Did an Irish immigrant working in the factories of Richmond have reason to die for the Confederacy? A nonslaveholding mountaineer? An illiterate tenant farmer working on some other man's land? The proximity of the Union forces and their own families encouraged potential deserters to try their luck. Kevin C. Ruffner's essay shows how one Virginia regiment was organized, how it changed over the course of the war, how its men were tempted to leave their posts, and why some did. Desertion measured in concrete terms the conflicts that tore at white Virginians in the era of the Civil War. But the divisions uncovered by Ruffner's innovative research do not correspond to the fault lines of the antebellum and Confederate South sketched by previous historians. From the perspective of the 44th Infantry Regiment, Virginia was both unified and divided in ways more subtle than our usual categories can describe.

Black Virginians experienced their own conflicts in the war years, conflicts that often bore little resemblance to those among whites. When a Federal unit arrived on a plantation, some slaves claimed the soldiers as their liberators, grasping freedom in whatever tenuous form it came. Others bided their time, keeping on good terms with the white people they lived among, protecting a relationship which might prove critical to an ex-slave's success in freedom. On plantations and farms across Virginia, hundreds of thousands of black people prepared to make these de-

cisions on the spur of the moment and endure the consequences for the rest of their lives.

Slaves carefully watched the plantation and its owners as they struggled to adapt to the events of war, emancipation, and surrender. On tobacco and wheat plantations, former masters approached black Virginians to strike deals. Some planters offered as little change as possible, maintaining gang labor, slave quarters, and sharp constraints on black freedom; some planters allowed valued workers and their families the chance to farm a piece of land with little supervision. These decisions turned not only on the kindness of the master but also on the ambition of the former slaves, on the prices the crops brought, and on the scarcity of labor. Gregg Michel follows a large wheat plantation through the Civil War and the decades beyond to see how such a place evolved in these years of tumult, to see how whites and the black people who worked their land dealt with one another as the state moved from war into the years of the New South. The experience of black and white Virginians at Hickory Hill shows the limitations of models of the Southern economy focused only on the cotton regions.

Black Virginians in the state's major cities faced a set of choices and compulsions quite different from those confronting rural slaves. Virginia's cities offered former slaves unusual opportunities: opportunities to work in a far broader range of occupations than blacks in the cotton South, to take part in a social life in which blacks ran their own organizations, to vote for a party which had considerable strength and possibility for success. Moreover, urban blacks tended to be more skilled and more literate than their rural counterparts. Lawrence L. Hartzell examines the attempts of blacks in Petersburg to build new lives for themselves, their efforts hindered by the decline of Petersburg from one of the largest and most prosperous Southern cities before the Civil War into a stagnant backwater. The Petersburg story reveals a black community which was both active and divided, as common people and leaders alike constantly negotiated their way among conflicting opportunities and aspirations.

A Virginia weakened by poverty, defeat, and the massive departure of former citizens of both races saw some more promising changes and innovations in the decades after the Civil War. Postbellum railroad building brought a variety of new opportunities to Virginia, opening large parts of the southwestern part of the state to mining and lumbering, creating towns virtually overnight, rearranging the economic lives of farm families for miles around, and bringing blacks from cities to the coalfields.

Virginia's new railroads brought travelers in search of diversion and relaxation as well as men on the make in the decades after the Civil War. Its warm springs had attracted visitors long before the war, but now the state offered new and more modern attractions. Virginia welcomed tourists who traveled from Boston, New York, or Washington to visit luxurious resorts. Huge hotels arose in Virginia's mountains and valleys, and soon wealthy men and women were strolling through impressive lobbies and carefully tended gardens. The chapter by Elizabeth Atwood tells of the development of Luray in the Shenandoah Valley, where enterprising outsiders discovered and promoted massive caverns. The history of the Luray Caverns reveals the growth of tourism to be as contested as the growth of more traditional industries, as locals and Northern businessmen maneuvered for commercial advantage and for control of the town and its future.

The mountains of southwest Virginia saw the new order arrive with a startling rapidity. In a matter of a few years, places such as Wise County went from farming economies only loosely connected to commercial agriculture to outposts of heavy industry. Towns by the dozen were founded along the railroads, and mining shafts were driven deep into mountains that had seen only the grazing of cattle and hogs. In this rapid change, local people had to make decisions of far-reaching importance: to what extent would they cast their lot with the new order, the new men, the new money? Robert Weise's chapter examines the decisions people made in Wise County and offers a bold reinterpretation of their motives and of Appalachian history in general.

Throughout the years when Virginia was undergoing all these social and economic changes, the state also experienced deep and unusual political change. While states to the south passed through years of turbulent Reconstruction, white conservative leaders in Virginia managed to harness the forces of change. The state saw only a brief and mild form of political control by Republicans, but then, unlike any other Southern state, Virginia witnessed the closest thing to a political revolt by men of both races and of all classes. The Readjuster movement of the early 1880s was unique in the South, a successful broad-gauged assault against the regime of the conservative whites. Those conservatives sought to tax the state's people to pay wealthy bondholders on debts accrued by the state years before, and they were willing to beggar the public schools to meet the payments. The coalition that sought to lower or "readjust" the debt—a coalition of Republicans and Democrats, blacks and whites, poor and privileged—could hold on only briefly to the power they won. Their defeat made it even more difficult for subsequent dissidents to gain

a hearing in the state; while neighboring states were convulsed by the Populist movement in the 1890s, Virginia experienced only the mildest forms of political revolt in that decade.

As in other Southern states, though, Virginia Democrats maneuvered to prevent anything resembling Readjusterism or Populism from ever happening again. Throughout the nineteenth century, white Virginians enjoyed telling themselves and anyone else who would listen that their state was more moderate and less cruelly racist than states farther south. Indeed, Virginia saw relatively few lynchings in the heyday of that barbarity, was late to segregate its railroads, and waited until 1901 to hold a constitutional convention to deprive its black citizens of their votes—more than a decade after the first state in the South had done so. As the chapter by Beth B. Schweiger reveals, the debates and doubts about the reduction of the vote showed Virginia leaders' ambivalence about their actions, an ambivalence missing from virtually every other account of Southern disfranchisement. Hope for a vibrant democracy of educated white men warred with dreams of a firmly controlled biracial society and fears of white dissension. Virginia ended the century the way it had started, anxiously negotiating between national ideals and Southern problems, between a vision of an illustrious past and a present which always seemed full of ambiguity and disappointment.

The final chapter in the book, by Angie Parrott, chronicles the attempts of a visible and determined group of Virginia women to resolve their state's problematic identity. The United Daughters of the Confederacy sought to overcome the forgetfulness toward Confederate veterans displayed by so many white Southerners near the turn of the century. Although Richmond became more like a Northern city every year—with streetcar suburbs, corporation headquarters, and college football games—women in the city worked to provide constant reminders of a more Southern past. Monitoring schoolbooks for evidence of Northern bias, taking care of elderly veterans neglected by the new generation, and building monuments to remind the young of the heroes of an earlier age, the Daughters took an active hand in shaping the way Virginians recalled the past. While the UDC was far more active than stereotypes of Southern women would lead us to believe, they were active in a self-consciously reactionary cause. By and large, the Daughters and their many allies in historical revision succeeded in their crusade. Virginians of the twentieth century forgot how complex a heritage their white and black ancestors had bequeathed to the state, and each generation felt itself the first to confront the full dilemma of being both Virginian and American. We hope this book can help reclaim some of that complexity.