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Edward L. Ayers

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VIRGINIA HISTORY AS SOUTHERN HISTORY

The Nineteenth Century

by EDWARD L. AYERS*

BRENT TARTER has done such a thorough and imaginative job of alerting readers to the possibilities of Virginia history that it is difficult to know what to add. His knowledge of sources is surely unmatched, his feel for the subtleties of Virginia's history unparalleled. Rather than competing with that knowledge, this essay takes another tack altogether. While Tarter builds from the ground up, suggesting topics that might grow out of records no one has fully explored, we might also think about models of study offered by recent writings in Virginia history and on other states. This essay briefly surveys some of the best work that has been done over the last ten years or so in the field of nineteenth-century Virginia and southern history in general, hoping to supply inspiration for histories yet to be written.

Virginia history has undergone a renaissance in recent years. Although the historiography of the colonial and the early national periods has long been superb, the same could not always be said for the century after 1820. Vast stretches of Virginia history lay fallow, not unlike the weary fields of the antebellum Chesapeake. The state did not seem typical enough of the nation, or even the South, to attract many young scholars looking for a case study. Nineteenth-century Virginia's cities, factories, wheat fields, truck farms, oyster beds, and orchards set it apart from the cotton fields of supposedly quintessential southern states, while its widespread slavery set it apart from Atlantic seaboard states to the north.

Despite these apparent liabilities, Virginia has attracted a growing number of talented historians undeterred by the state's uniqueness. Indeed, not a few scholars have written superb books that make no apologies for their subject's unseemly mix of modernity and slavery. In her path-breaking volume *The Free Women of Petersburg*, Suzanne Lebsock asked rhetorically, "Why Petersburg?" as a case study of

* Edward L. Ayers is the Hugh P. Kelly Professor of History at the University of Virginia.

southern women, black and white. Her answer was refreshing: "Why not?" Marie Tyler-McGraw placed the tensions and conflicts in Richmond at the center of her history of the city. She ignored neither the rapid changes the city was undergoing in the nineteenth century nor its strong attachments to the past. Lynda J. Morgan explored slavery in central Virginia with an eye alert to the adaptations that slaves, free blacks, employers, and owners made to the shifting opportunities and constraints of the years surrounding the Civil War. Ten graduate students at the University of Virginia published penetrating essays around the theme of anomaly in a collection called *The Edge of the South*. Kenneth W. Noe's recent study of southwest Virginia on the eve of secession emphasized a crisis of modernity.¹

Historians have found sources in Virginia that have permitted them to write studies possible for no other place. Daniel W. Crofts discovered complete voting records for Southampton County from the 1820s through the 1870s, records that allowed him to explore, on a person-by-person level, the intricacies of the political and economic systems of a county over several decades. With a sure eye for detail and an expert's knowledge of the nation's political dynamics, Crofts has written one of the most interesting and useful books we have on nineteenth-century American politics. When we can see how each white man in a county voted, we can see how deeply enmeshed the political system was with neighborhoods, with patrons and clients, with church membership, with economic status, with unfolding events. *Old Southampton* tells us more about the nation's and the region's political system than books that cover far greater stretches of geography.²

Brenda E. Stevenson's exciting new book, *Life in Black and White*, explores family life among the people of both races. By examining in great detail the rituals of courtship, marriage, childbirth, and divorce in Loudoun County throughout the antebellum era, Stevenson allows us to imagine that complicated society in a new way. Rather than focusing only on the master-slave relationship, she portrays life in the big house as well as life in the slave quarters, in town as well as in the country. She shows what white people shared with black people and where they differed. The result is a fuller and more fully human picture of the daily

¹ Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (New York, 1984); Marie Tyler-McGraw, *At the Falls: Richmond, Virginia, and Its People* (Chapel Hill and London, 1994); Lynda J. Morgan, *Emancipation in Virginia's Tobacco Belt, 1850-1870* (Athens, Ga., and London, 1992); Edward L. Ayers and John C. Willis, eds., *The Edge of the South: Life in Nineteenth-Century Virginia* (Charlottesville and London, 1991); Kenneth W. Noe, *Southwest Virginia's Railroad: Modernization and the Sectional Crisis* (Urbana and Chicago, 1994).

² Daniel W. Crofts, *Old Southampton: Politics and Society in a Virginia County, 1834-1869* (Charlottesville and London, 1992).

lives of people of all shades than we have ever before possessed—a valuable contribution indeed.³

Similarly, Charles B. Dew has taken advantage of a remarkably detailed set of records to recreate the world of a nineteenth-century iron forge where slaves worked in a kind of hybrid system that would be difficult to imagine if we could not see in such vivid detail that it actually existed. By reconstructing the daily lives of the skilled slave workers at Buffalo Forge, Dew shows us extraordinarily complex negotiations between slave owner and worker. Slavery looks no less painful, but much more complicated, in Dew's account of this unusual place in the Valley; his discoveries lead us to think a bit harder about slavery elsewhere in the South.⁴

Douglas R. Egerton, too, uncovers a world we had not known existed. In his penetrating history of Gabriel's Rebellion, Egerton finds that the boundaries between whites and blacks were not as secure as we might imagine—or as secure as many whites at the time wanted to believe. Egerton makes the intriguing, if unprovable, argument that Frenchmen and Quakers, adhering to ideals of human freedom and equality that violated southern racial prescriptions, conspired with the slaves who planned to revolt in Richmond in 1800. This focus on the specific has been taken to an impressive level of craftsmanship and dedication in Daniel E. Sutherland's *Seasons of War*. Sutherland has combed through every piece of evidence that might hold out a clue about life in Culpeper County during the years of the Civil War. The result is nearly four hundred pages of crystalline detail and compelling narrative.⁵

The Civil War in Virginia has been the scene of a large number of powerful battlefield histories in recent years, though the state appears more often as landscape and background than as an active character in those accounts. But there are exceptions. The portions of Charles Royster's stunning volume *The Destructive War* that deal with Stonewall Jackson's personal history and fighting are exciting and original. Ervin L. Jordan, Jr.'s bold study *Black Confederates and Afro-Yankees in Civil War Virginia* explores important issues that less intrepid and industrious historians could not approach and opens all sorts of interesting questions about black life before, during, and after the war.⁶

³ Brenda E. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York and Oxford, 1996).

⁴ Charles B. Dew, *Bond of Iron: Master and Slave at Buffalo Forge* (New York, 1994).

⁵ Douglas R. Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802* (Chapel Hill and London, 1993); Daniel E. Sutherland, *Seasons of War: The Ordeal of a Confederate Community, 1861–1865* (New York, London, and Toronto, 1995).

⁶ Charles Royster, *The Destructive War: William Tecumseh Sherman, Stonewall Jackson, and the Americans* (New York, 1991); Ervin L. Jordan, Jr., *Black Confederates and Afro-Yankees in Civil War Virginia, A Nation Divided: New Studies in Civil War History* (Charlottesville and London, 1995).

Virginia history has benefited, too, from the effort on the part of H. E. Howard of Lynchburg to publish histories of all the units from the commonwealth that fought in the Civil War. The dozens of volumes produced so far are, by and large, labors of love, the products of dedicated historians, academic and otherwise, who have carefully reconstructed the records of regiments and other military units. Although, inevitably, the books are uneven, the effort put into them and the potential they hold out are impressive indeed. We are also fortunate to have James I. Robertson, Jr.'s useful *Civil War Virginia*, a guide that lays out the basic story for popular and scholarly audiences alike.⁷

The postwar era has been the beneficiary of superb work as well. Although the classic studies on the political history of Virginia were written in the 1960s and 1970s—one thinks of Allen W. Moger's *Bourbonism to Byrd* and of James Tice Moore's *Two Paths to the New South*—exciting histories have been written on the state's social history. William A. Link's *A Hard Country and a Lonely Place*, a study of education in postbellum Virginia, is by a considerable margin the best book on education anywhere in the South. Jack Temple Kirby's new *Poquosin*, devoted to the landscape of southeastern Virginia, is a tour de force of the new environmental history. By uncovering facets of river, soil, estuary, and forest, Kirby gives whole new dimensions to our conception of history. Crandall A. Shifflett's *Coal Towns* takes a bold new stance toward life and labor in the coalfields of southwest Virginia and recasts the way we think of southern Appalachia. James M. Lindgren's *Preserving the Old Dominion* is a pioneering study in the formation of social memory, a promising new field in cultural history. W. Fitzhugh Brundage's *Lynching in the New South*, comparing Virginia with Georgia, explores the relatively low rates of lynching in the Upper South state through disciplined comparison and deep insight.⁸

These books suggest that only by getting outside of Virginia's history can we really understand it. The best studies explore the commonwealth's history not merely for its own sake but better to understand the

⁷ H. E. Howard, Inc., The Virginia Regimental Histories Series (125 vols. [projected]; Lynchburg, Va., 1982–). These volumes are widely available in libraries and bookstores around the state. See also James I. Robertson, Jr., *Civil War Virginia: Battleground for a Nation* (Charlottesville, 1991).

⁸ Allen W. Moger, *Virginia: Bourbonism to Byrd, 1870–1925* (Charlottesville, 1968); James Tice Moore, *Two Paths to the New South: The Virginia Debt Controversy, 1870–1883* (Lexington, Ky., 1974); William A. Link, *A Hard Country and a Lonely Place: Schooling, Society, and Reform in Rural Virginia, 1870–1920*, The Fred W. Morrison Series in Southern Studies (Chapel Hill and London, 1986); Jack Temple Kirby, *Poquosin: A Study of Rural Landscape and Society*, Studies in Rural Culture (Chapel Hill and London, 1995); Crandall A. Shifflett, *Coal Towns: Life, Work, and Culture in Company Towns of Southern Appalachia, 1880–1960* (Knoxville, 1991); James M. Lindgren, *Preserving the Old Dominion: Historic Preservation and Virginia Traditionalism* (Charlottesville and London, 1993); W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880–1930*, Blacks in the New World Series (Urbana and Chicago, 1993).

forces and events that affected the entire American South. All the best Virginia historians are aware of work written for other states, and all keep an eye out for commonalities and differences. It is only by setting Virginia in that kind of context that we are likely to maintain the flow of such exciting histories.

There are a number of recent books in southern history that might well serve as models for new Virginia histories. These books pose questions that should be asked of this state's history, use methods that might be applied to Virginia, or make arguments about the South as a whole that studies of Virginia might well counter. As fascinating as the Old Dominion is, it is only part of a much larger mosaic.

We might start our understanding of the nineteenth-century commonwealth from the ground up. We know remarkably little about the actual practice of agriculture, the way of life for the vast majority of antebellum Virginians, black and white. We know something of soil exhaustion and Edmund Ruffin's reform efforts thanks to David F. Allmendinger, Jr., but rural life and work in antebellum Virginia would repay more intensive tilling and care. Joyce E. Chaplin's study of agricultural practice and innovation in the Lower South in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries sets a fine example. John T. Schlotterbeck's work, both published and unpublished, on Orange and Greene counties is very useful, but we could and should know far more about other areas of the state. Books patterned on Steven Hahn's and J. William Harris's studies of Georgia and Lacy K. Ford, Jr.'s study of South Carolina would go a long way toward showing us how the great majority of white Virginians lived before the Civil War. John C. Inscoe's pioneering study of slaveholding in the mountains of western North Carolina shows what similar studies of southwest Virginia and even present-day West Virginia might find.⁹

We have only scratched the surface of slavery. A study modeled on Ann Patton Malone's *Sweet Chariot: Slave Family and Household Structure in Nineteenth-Century Louisiana* would help us see black life in the Old Dominion with new depth. Her careful reconstruction of the

⁹ David F. Allmendinger, Jr., *Ruffin: Family and Reform in the Old South* (New York and Oxford, 1990); Joyce E. Chaplin, *An Anxious Pursuit: Agricultural Innovation and Modernity in the Lower South, 1730-1815* (Chapel Hill, 1993); John T. Schlotterbeck, "The 'Social Economy' of an Upper South Community: Orange and Greene Counties, Virginia, 1815-1860," in Orville Vernon Burton and Robert C. McMath, Jr., eds., *Class, Conflict, and Consensus: Antebellum Southern Community Studies* (Westport, Conn., and London, 1982), pp. 3-28; Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890* (New York and Oxford, 1983); J. William Harris, *Plain Folk and Gentry in a Slave Society: White Liberty and Black Slavery in Augusta's Hinterlands* (Middletown, Conn., 1985); Lacy K. Ford, Jr., *Origins of Southern Radicalism: The South Carolina Upcountry, 1800-1860* (New York and Oxford, 1988); John C. Inscoe, *Mountain Masters, Slavery, and the Sectional Crisis in Western North Carolina* (Knoxville, 1989).

way families absorbed and rebuffed the vicissitudes of slavery would be especially valuable for Virginia, where the slave trade to the Southwest repeatedly separated family members from one another. Similarly, Melton A. McLaurin's *Celia, a Slave*, the story of a young woman tried for the murder of her master in Missouri, shows the possibilities of court records and case studies. McLaurin's book wrings powerful insights from this single incident. Winthrop D. Jordan's *Tumult and Silence at Second Creek* is a model of what can be done with only fragmentary and suggestive records. With sensitivity and honesty, Jordan offers a speculative history of what may or may not have been a nascent slave revolt in a way that reveals more about its society than most conclusive studies. Although no historian (not even Brent Tarter) can legitimately hope to find records as detailed and revealing as those Michael P. Johnson and James L. Roark found for South Carolina, *Black Masters* can still stand as a model of what detective work and imagination can do. This painful study of a free black family who bought and sold slaves raises disturbing questions about the construction of race and power in the Old South.¹⁰

Although the battlefields of Civil War Virginia have been written about in great detail and with loving devotion, the home front has not received anything like the attention it deserves. The Sutherland book sets an example for other Virginia histories to follow, but aspiring historians might look at studies of other places for different kinds of questions and strategies. Michael Fellman's *Inside War*, a visceral description of the bloodletting and chaos unleashed by guerrilla warfare in Missouri, reminds us of features of the war often forgotten in descriptions of battlefield heroics. Wayne K. Durrill's account of a North Carolina county tries to measure the effect of the war on each facet of life, while Stephen V. Ash's brand new *When the Yankees Came* tells the story of the occupied areas of the Confederacy. For a state such as Virginia, such studies could be multiplied many times over and still not exhaust the stories to be told. Although it was written more than thirty years ago, Willie Lee Rose's *Rehearsal for Reconstruction* is still a model for what local history can teach us about issues of national scope.¹¹

¹⁰ Ann Patton Malone, *Sweet Chariot: Slave Family and Household Structure in Nineteenth-Century Louisiana*, The Fred W. Morrison Series in Southern Studies (Chapel Hill, 1992); Melton A. McLaurin, *Celia, a Slave* (Athens, Ga., and London, 1991); Winthrop D. Jordan, *Tumult and Silence at Second Creek: An Inquiry into a Civil War Slave Conspiracy* (Baton Rouge, 1993); Michael P. Johnson and James L. Roark, *Black Masters: A Free Family of Color in the Old South* (New York and London, 1984).

¹¹ Michael Fellman, *Inside War: The Guerrilla Conflict in Missouri during the American Civil War* (New York, 1989); Wayne K. Durrill, *War of Another Kind: A Southern Community in the Great Rebellion* (New York, 1990); Stephen V. Ash, *When the Yankees Came: Conflict and Chaos in the Occupied South, 1861-1865*, Civil War America (Chapel Hill and London, 1995);

Antebellum Virginia and Civil War Virginia offer wonderful opportunities, but the postwar South may hold out even greater chances for innovative studies. We know remarkably little about Virginia after the war, despite fine books such as Michael B. Chesson's history of Richmond. The history of the state will not be balanced and thorough until we have Virginia counterparts to the studies of mill life written for South Carolina by David L. Carlton, for North Carolina by Allen Tullos and Jacqueline Dowd Hall and her colleagues, and for Georgia by Douglas Flamming. Virginia's tobacco factories, textile mills, oyster boats, and coal mines demand and deserve their own histories. We need studies of the rural landscape of the Old Dominion such as the evocative ones recently produced by Mark V. Wetherington for wiregrass Georgia and Jeanette Keith for central Tennessee.¹²

Thanks to books such as Jan Lewis's, Suzanne Lebsock's, and Joan E. Cashin's, antebellum Virginia has been in the forefront of southern women's history. But the situation after the Civil War is not nearly as heartening. Although Marjorie Spruill Wheeler's *New Women of the New South* contains superb accounts of leading Virginia women, we know little about the women below the elite ranks. We would be much enriched by Virginia counterparts to Janette Thomas Greenwood's brilliant study of the black and white middle classes in Charlotte, where she reveals the critical role women of both races played in every facet of history. We need studies such as Victoria E. Bynum's exploration of unruly women who got in trouble with the courts, who tested and violated the boundaries of accepted behavior. We need accounts such as Nancy MacLean's bold portrayal of the role of women in the Ku Klux Klan in the early twentieth century.¹³

Willie Lee Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment* (Indianapolis, New York, and Kansas City, 1964).

¹² Michael B. Chesson, *Richmond After the War, 1865–1890* (Richmond, 1981); David L. Carlton, *Mill and Town in South Carolina, 1880–1920* (Baton Rouge, 1982); Allen Tullos, *Habits of Industry: White Culture and the Transformation of the Carolina Piedmont*, The Fred W. Morrison Series in Southern Studies (Chapel Hill, 1989); Jacqueline Dowd Hall et al., *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World*, The Fred W. Morrison Series in Southern Studies (Chapel Hill and London, 1987); Douglas Flamming, *Creating the Modern South: Millhands and Managers in Dalton, Georgia, 1884–1984* (Chapel Hill, 1992); Mark V. Wetherington, *The New South Comes to Wiregrass Georgia, 1860–1910* (Knoxville, 1994); Jeanette Keith, *Country People in the New South: Tennessee's Upper Cumberland*, Studies in Rural Culture (Chapel Hill, 1995).

¹³ Jan Lewis, *The Pursuit of Happiness: Family and Values in Jefferson's Virginia* (Cambridge, London, and New York, 1983); Lebsock, *Free Women of Petersburg*; Joan E. Cashin, *A Family Venture: Men and Women on the Southern Frontier* (New York and Oxford, 1991); Marjorie Spruill Wheeler, *New Women of the New South: The Leaders of the Woman Suffrage Movement in the Southern States* (New York and Oxford, 1993); Janette Thomas Greenwood, *Bittersweet Legacy: The Black and White "Better Classes" in Charlotte, 1850–1910* (Chapel Hill, 1994); Victoria E. Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old*

There is, in other words, an enormous amount of work to be done in Virginia history. Not only do we have the sources to do that work, as Brent Tarter has so usefully shown, but we also have models of what kind of exciting history can be written from those sources. Over the last few decades, historians have discovered that we can know far more about the past than we ever before thought possible. We can gain glimpses into the lives of people who had been mute and invisible. There has never been a more exciting time to write Virginia history.