

Constructing a History of Virginia

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Cradle of America: Four Centuries of Virginia History came out early last month. Two years before it did, I had no idea I would be writing it. And when the idea came to me to write any such book, I had no idea it would be this one.

Over those two years, I did much of what I would have been doing anyway — taught classes, including new ones; did committee work; directed graduate theses or served on thesis committees; proposed and wrote and gave conference papers; accepted requests that I evaluate journal article submissions; accepted requests that I read book manuscripts for friends or presses; turned down invitations to write book reviews; and worked on a couple of book projects. All just as I would have done anyway, except that those other book projects got delayed, because I turned ever more of my attention to another book, what I think of as my “accidental book.” Increasingly, moreover, those routine things comprised distractions from my emerging mission — every week or day I spent on something else deflected me from my accidental book. So there was a parallel track, not just a single line; two trains, not one.

I want to address the question Brent Tarter asked of us in this session— how we came to construct our books the way we did. But the question has two answers, or rather two overlapping sets of answers. On the one hand are the deliberate decisions I made, at the outset or along the way. On the other hand are the multifarious unpredictable ways the thing unfolded.

My book began with entirely parochial considerations in mind. In my acknowledgments, I explain how I was asked two years ago (March 8, 2005) might I teach an honors course for undergraduates, and instead of simply declining the invitation as having come too late (I already had a class schedule set for the coming fall), I considered it — and suddenly realized that it presented a great opportunity. My teaching passion, at a research institution, is undergraduate research. My teaching persona at Tech is the face of undergraduate research in the social sciences and humanities there. I would work with a small group of Honors undergraduates, whoever they turned out to be, to write a brief history of Virginia. What an experiment, what an adventure, it would be! My course description began with a question: “Written a good book lately?” (Turned out none of the students who ended up taking the class ever had.)

That May, or two years ago next month, I emerged from whatever I had been working on — a journal article in galley, a reference essay I had agreed to write so a friend could get an encyclopedia completed, conference proposals for the coming year; writing one of those papers — and remembered I had a course coming up, with a book of some sort to construct. I approached my editor at Kansas, to whom I had promised a book anyway the coming January (2006). Might the press be interested, I inquired, in a SHORT BOOK on the HISTORY OF

VIRGINIA, what with the 400th anniversary of Jamestown coming nigh? Absolutely, came the reply. Let's postpone that other book and be doing this one instead. Same delivery date. Get us a proposal; we'll send it out to readers. So I did; and they did.

By August I had three reader's reports, a contract, a January deadline, a target length of some 80,000 words (70,000–90,000, just like the book I was postponing), and a class that began with a dozen undergraduates. I also had some fragments of a possible book, some 30,000 words worth. And I had a chapter outline, dating back to the early 1990s. I turned my students loose, as I got immersed in the three Cs of academic life — classes, committees, and conferences. To my delight, one after another of those students began to generate some really fine material. Also, as I explain in the acknowledgments, one of them supplied a title for the book, and it stuck. Nine honors undergraduates stayed with the experiment, and their picture is in the acknowledgments, as is an account of their contributions.

Fall semester neared its end. But the book was far from finished. I tried to shuck all competing obligations. Though I didn't see how I could turn some things away, at least those three Cs let me go. I hadn't been telling anyone of my possible book. It didn't seem possible, let alone imminent; and anyway I'd been rather busy at other things. But I had a month or so to go, and I began adding some two or three thousand words a day — every ten days perhaps another 25,000 words.

Between semesters, I called on all available reserve troops at my command, pressed them into service: books I'd read, and papers I'd written, some forty years before, as a grad student or undergraduate; dozens and more dozens of reference entries I had written over the past twenty years, many of them on Virginia history; talks I'd given; every book I'd ever written; every place I've ever taught. I'd written on James Madison, George Mason, Nat Turner, Thomas Roderick Dew, Thornton Stringfellow, John Brown, Henry "Box" Brown, Anthony Burns, Alice Jackson, Aline Black, Belva Lockwood, Oliver Hill, Sterling Hutcheson, Mrs. A. Philip Randolph. I tell stories. And I wanted people's biographies to carry my story. I had also long MEANT to write essays on "Alexandria, D.C.," or "Jim Crow's New Deal," and the like, and the book supplied a venue for short versions of these.

The acknowledgments tell how the book began — but not so much how it became the book it did. The word count grew, a lot. It reached my 80,000-word target, then 100,000, then 120,000. I kept trimming material, but I added more. The thing was actually taking shape — more or less the shape I'd had in mind, but on not at all the scale. It really began to look like a book. But this was one BIG book.

January neared its end. Deadline. I shipped it. Turned my attention back to those two other books; shipped them. Readers' reports on THE BOOK came back. Time to prep for copyedit. Made that deadline. Looking for pictures. Editor suddenly urged MORE pictures than we had agreed on, so I pushed hard down that road last summer, finding new photos, writing new captions — doing all that and getting permissions averaged at least a day for each of the 84 illustrations. The book was still changing, growing. In all I think it reached 160,000 words, twice the original target.

I point out in the introduction to the book that both the title and the subtitle serve as assertions and also questions. Virginia can indeed be seen as the “cradle of America”: it was the site of the first permanent English settlement in North America, the birthplace of a presidential dynasty that led a new nation, and the gateway to western growth in the new nation’s early years — Virginia explains much not only of the nation’s acquisition of vast territory to the west but also of the populating of that territory. Yet Virginia could also diverge from, even swing into dramatic opposition to, the nation’s leading social and political currents — witness secession and Civil War. Similarly, the subtitle, “four centuries of Virginia history,” reflects the publication date 400 years after the founding of Jamestown. Yet the first chapter, focusing on Virginia’s beginnings at Roanoke Island a generation earlier, is titled “Elizabethan Virginia.” So I like both the title and the subtitle, but I also argue a bit with them, make them questions as well as declarations.

I’d like to remind you about the nine honors students who worked with me on the book, back in fall 2005. First books arrived — at the house, who knows why — on Thursday, March 1. Back at the office the next morning — the day before spring break began — I sent out a message announcing we have books, stop by if you are still in town. First to show up was Bridget Devlin, who had done the most writing, or the most that found its way into the book. She turned to World War II, where she had begun her work. Sure enough, it began pretty much the way she had originated it, with material she had drafted, and she squealed with delight and amazement, “I WROTE that!”

She also saw — with enthusiastic approval — the acknowledgments, where I recount the book’s origins, including the roles Bridget and her classmates played in developing the project. (The acknowledgments are placed at the back of the book, way at the back, just before the index — a condition imposed by my editor to permit my including a photograph of the class).

Now, back to Brent’s question. Back when I was running out of time, out of space, and out of material I felt I had a special command of, I shifted the ratio of space per century. I’ve published in all four centuries, but I’m most at home in the 19th and 20th. Moreover, my ideas for the book grew, to a great extent, out of years of teaching Virginia history. Once upon a time, when Virginia Tech was on the quarter system, Virginia history was a two-quarter course, divided at 1830. When we changed to the semester system, I had only one semester, so three-fourths as much time; rather than trim proportionally, I treated the first half as backdrop, with but one-third as much time as the second half, the pace of which remained more or less unchanged.

The book reflects that sorting out. Chapter 1 is on what I call Elizabethan Virginia, chapter 2 on Jamestown. But the third chapter absorbed what had also been in the fourth and fifth; the history of the colony was called upon to subsidize the history of the state; the years through 1763 held on to about 4 chapters out of 25. In contrast to the comparable book — *Old Dominion, New Commonwealth*, just out this weekend, and also under discussion today — I didn’t have the discipline of apportioning space across four authors, each with a century to work with. So my book races to Jefferson’s first inaugural, in 1801, after only 7 chapters, or 28 percent of the total.

That’s time. Then there’s space—and society, various social groups, as well as deploying biographical sketches to carry much of the story. Virginia history is traditionally centered on the

east, and centered on people with pale faces. What happens if we change the circle to an ellipse? Adopt TWO foci, whether black AND white, or west AND east — Blacksburg and Jamestown, Carter G. Woodson and Douglas Southall Freeman, the Massive Resisters and those who resisted them — and you have the substantive makings of a very different portrait of Virginia's past.

I mostly tell Virginia's history through biographical sketches. Doing so, I reveal individuals responding to the great public developments of their time, and indeed resisting, or at least working to shape, and even initiating, those big developments. Characterizing the book, then, are these portraits of interplay between one or another representative or iconic person and the social patterns, political struggles, economic transformations, and wars of the past and the present.

Themes. I've never wanted to write a textbook, something that, if assigned the task of including everything, is at great risk of becoming an encyclopedia. I determined early on that I would emphasize three themes. Given what I find fascinating and think central, one — the primary one, I'd say — is racial identity and how it has played out across the generations. Another dates back to an illuminating short long-ago book by Bernard Bailyn treating education as the transmission of culture across generations. And the third is political power, policymaking, what governments do, either for people or to them. An example of where those three dominant themes clearly come together is the 1950s era of Massive Resistance. Another is the 1880s biracial Readjuster movement, which I also highlight.

An additional distinguishing facet of the book appeared very late in the proceedings. I've mentioned how my editors came to me expressing a wish for more photos. I don't do photos. Well, now maybe I do. I ransacked the Virginia Historical Society and the Library of Congress. I approached people at VMI, the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, the D-Day Memorial, and Advance Auto Parts. I paid good money to Corbis, the *New York Times*, and *Time* magazine. Some images I use to illustrate the text. Others STRETCH it, with mini-essays for captions. A fabulous map from 1650 REMAPS the colonial era, distinguishing "Ould Virginia" (the failed effort at Roanoke Island) from "New Virginia" (the settlement emanating from Jamestown) — and, beyond the fall line separating Tidewater from Piedmont, REVISIONS what a continental Virginia might have been understood as, conflating the Blue Ridge and the Rockies, so that Blacksburg might be San Francisco. (I had to throw out some photos. When the designer — the thing is a DESIGNER thing! — rejected two from the Library of Congress, period pieces that were too low-resolution to use, I moved the lengthy captions into the narrative.)

There's another leading feature. I wrote with a mountain of two to three hundred books around me, more than half of them from my own library, but many of them borrowed; and many of them venerable, some just off the press. If it was brand new, I wanted to see it if I could, but if not, no matter. Time was short, and good as so much work is that has come out in Virginia history over the past decade or two, I was not looking only (or perhaps even primarily) to write a synthesis of other scholars' versions of the past. Much of the time, I'd rather go straight to diaries and letters, slave narratives, court cases, what George Mason actually said, the papers of Alice Jackson, a visit with Mrs. Loving — first-hand, primary materials. I include a couple dozen documents so readers can have direct access to them, come to their own conclusions — and not depend on what I say those documents say.

Beyond the narrative, the documents, and the images, *Cradle* lists various reference books, Web sites, or films, followed by a fourteen-page bibliography organized by the book's twenty-five chapters. My lengthy bibliography leaves out some books deliberately, others no doubt inadvertently, and still others simply because they came out too late in 2006 to be included. As for the bigger ideas, they often come from my encounters with the writings of an Alfred Crosby or a William H. McNeill, who never knew they were Virginia historians. I never wanted to rely a lot on other people for my ideas or materials — although I regret that did not have the time in the past year to do more reading. A new book last summer on the Bill of Rights helped me recast what I had said on that subject, just as a book I came across on the Battle of Cowpens helped me recast a section on Virginia's Daniel Morgan and the American Revolution in the Carolinas.

I also supply five appendices containing a wealth of material much of it not readily available elsewhere. One lists the governors of the state of Virginia, ever since the Constitution of 1776 and the Declaration of Independence — governors who, all of them, actually resided in Virginia and were chosen, directly or indirectly, by the electorate. Another identifies all the U.S. senators from Virginia, two by two through the generations since ratification of the U.S. Constitution. Still another lists all the members of the Virginia Supreme Court since its reorganization in 1789, whether chosen by the General Assembly or (briefly) by the electorate. A fourth supplies information about how Virginians have voted in presidential elections, from George Washington's two elections down through Jamestown's 400th anniversary and George W. Bush's two elections. And the final appendix is on "Virginia and the Census Returns, 1790–2000," with statewide data plus Virginia's three biggest cities as enumerated in each census.

In the end, I produced — we produced — a complete history of Virginia by not doing any such thing. But I call attention to lesser-known, not just well-known, parts of the story — there's much I wanted to say that is not at all well-known. I set out to privilege black as well as white, and west as well as east, a strategy that will likely please some folks, aggrieve some, surprise others. I expect to disappoint people who, looking for wars, find only three that get much attention — the Revolution, the Civil War, and World War II. I may draw criticism from academic historians for my unorthodox understanding of George Mason or Thomas Dew, the Louisiana Purchase or the Hartford Convention, the politics of Reconstruction or the process of desegregation.

But now I have a book that I can teach, whether in my own classes or by reaching unseen audiences. I write the way I teach, whether in the ideas I have made my own or the documents that are my holy grail. If something doesn't make sense to me, I can't hope to make it make sense to anyone else. If I am successful in teaching through this book, that will be wondrous. Thank you.