

## **In the Beginning there was Virginia, and Virginia Led**

Mr. Speaker, Senators, Delegates, Governors Emeriti, President Reiss, other divinities, and friends all, it's grand to have you once again in the Colonial Capital.

**In the beginning there was Virginia**, the Old Dominion -- at least in the beginning of the English presence in North America. In the beginning, Virginia's territory was vast. It included a sweeping spread of what became the United States, plus healthy chunks of Canada and Mexico as well. In short, Virginia came first, and it was huge.

Many states later sprang from the Old Dominion's loins. Some like Maryland, the Carolinas, Kentucky and West Virginia acknowledge their ancestry. Other states are more reluctant to acknowledge from whence they sprang, despite the fact that all those south of Wyoming, from sea to sea, were once part of Virginia.

Even the dulcet island of Bermuda, which would have marvelously enhanced Virginia tourism, was once, very briefly, in the fold.

So, Massachusetts, any way you chew it Virginia has temporal pride of place. Virginia is more deeply rooted in America's soil and history than any other part of our country.

Indeed, we're gathered today in the Historic Triangle formed by Jamestown, Williamsburg, and Yorktown, all within spitting distance of one another. This Triangle, this small bit of geography, has deeper and more important roots in America's past than any other bit of turf in our country.

Here in the Triangle, at Jamestown, English colonists established their first permanent foothold in America in 1607, leading the way for waves of colonists yet to come.

Here in 1619, Virginia's House of Burgesses first met, setting in motion what has become the oldest continuous law making body in the New World, of which the General Assembly is now the lineal descendent, with citizen legislators who serve in the grand tradition of Virginia leaders who leave their regular jobs from time to time to care for the public interest.

In short, Virginia began representative government in America. The House of Burgesses was the first elected deliberative body in America. Senators and Delegates in this historic chamber today are the stewards of that great inheritance in our time.

Also in 1619, here in the Historic Triangle, began our country's ongoing passage through multicultural life with the arrival of the first Africans in Virginia. Then Native Americans, European Americans, African Americans, people with radically different backgrounds and perspectives, and with very different social and political stations, were thrown together in the Old Dominion to work out their futures, often tragically, as the European Americans in their growing numbers and strength pushed aside, often decimated, the Native Americans and enslaved the African Americans.

Here in the Triangle was the first flowering of free enterprise in America. The colonists came to the Old Dominion in the early 1600s to pursue their fortunes, to make money, not for religious reasons. Once the cultivation of tobacco got underway, they began making money, bundles of it.

Here seminal thought took place about the optimum nature of government for a free people and about the practical politics of beginning a revolution, leading to the creation of our nation and ultimately the decisive battle for our independence at Yorktown.

All in all, the Historic Triangle where we are now gathered has seen a remarkable number of great American leaders in action, and it has been a place where profoundly important American history has been made.

But so what? Truly, friends, does it make any difference these days amid the relentless technological advances, the enormous societal flux, and the pervasively bad mood of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century – amid all this does it really matter that Virginia came first and that Jamestown, Williamsburg, and Yorktown saw gifted humans do compelling deeds long ago? Really, what difference does it make if a state, or for that matter a university or family, has been around for a very long time and moved mountains in the past?

I've given this question some thought.

To judge by behavior, we humans do put stock in things with some age on them, especially if age comes with past distinction. So we Virginians carefully police the fact that Jamestown came first, not Plymouth Rock. Our colonists were here a whole 13 years before the Mayflower got blown off course and the Pilgrims ended up straggling ashore on the barren rocks of what became Massachusetts.

We Virginians also point out that the first thanksgiving in America took place at Berkeley on the James River in 1619. The Pilgrims didn't have their feast with neighboring tribes until several years thereafter, although our friends in Massachusetts have obscured that fact by effectively marketing a sweet vision of Pilgrims at table with Indians.

Institutions, such as William & Mary, celebrate their birthdays every 25 years, with special fervor on occasions denominated in the 100s. Most entities, as soon as they've been around awhile, begin to celebrate their anniversaries with growing passion as the years roll on.

Perhaps consideration of our mortality encourages us to gravitate toward age-old organizations. Knowing that we live comparatively brief lives, we welcome the chance to align ourselves with institutions that share our values and will continue to serve them long after we have shuffled off our mortal coils. This gives us a tie to a future we'll never experience while providing us the security of an anchor to the past.

But even more the point, it seems that we care about venerable institutions like the Commonwealth of Virginia because there is a presumption of quality inherent in age. People who belong to venerable institutions feel distinguished themselves because of the association. They are nourished vicariously by the institution's deep roots and flourish under the glory of its ancient foliage. They feel linked to past generations, on common ground with those who also have been nourished by the institution in earlier years. This is especially true when those who have gone before did glittering deeds.

But why presume age and quality go hand in hand? In my view, age suggests staying power, the ability to keep going through thick and thin. It suggests the capacity over time to survive adversity and seize opportunity. Age often engenders the poise and the dignity that come from surmounting countless flaps and crises, having been there and done that for generations, having seen it all. And age brings the wisdom born of experience, especially the knowledge what not to change even as everything else does.

Whether states, universities or families, some institutions move powerfully from one generation to the next. Others find themselves becalmed, or founder. Reasons for success or failure are legion. But those institutions that prevail usually take strength from their past. They remember their heroes, their times of peril and triumph, and their basic beliefs. The importance of the past as a source of confidence and poise grows with the turmoil of the present.

The struggles and mistakes of the past serve as a useful guide. They reassure and comfort. Things come and go, not always happily. People get angry. But, if successful, the institution moves forward, tempered by its passage through the fires. The inevitable fires are usually damped by the respect and affection traditional among those who share an institutional home.

Since 1607, Virginia has been through some rough times, indeed some terrible times. Slavery, secession, and segregation come quickly to mind. Each took a terrible toll on the Commonwealth.

Then, too, there is the matter of political and economic power. In our country's first national census, Virginia was the most populous state, almost twice the size of the next largest. Virginia was preeminent politically, supplying four of the country's first five presidents, the brilliant run of Washington, Jefferson, Madison and Monroe, and Virginia supplied the great chief justice of the United States, John Marshall.

Now, I must pause to note, lest I not be allowed back on campus, George Washington had intimate ties to William & Mary, Thomas Jefferson and James Monroe were among William & Mary's undergraduate alumni and John Marshall was among

William & Mary's first law students. Not for nothing does William & Mary call itself the Alma Mater of the Nation.

But to my message. Even amid the splendor of Virginia's political and economic power, the seeds of decline had been sown. Intense cultivation of tobacco for generation after generation had exhausted the Commonwealth's soil, leaving parts of her territory barren: in the words of one observer, there was "a scene of desolation that baffled description – farm after farm worn out, washed and gullied, so that scarcely an acre could be found in a place fit for cultivation." With the soil exhausted, there followed a massive exodus from Virginia between the Revolutionary War and Civil War, perhaps a million of our citizens left to seek their fortunes amid more fertile land to the west and south. With the exodus, Virginia's congressional delegation was cut in half, and its political and economic power waned, though it remained preeminent in the South.

Of course, Virginia has also enjoyed many robustly good times. Those good times in recent decades have been funded in meaningful part by the taxpayers of other states through the federal government's enormous defense spending in the Commonwealth, especially Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads. Now this tribute from out of state may have been seemly recognition that, in the beginning, all America was Virginia, but still it has had a quality of living on borrowed time.

Time has run out. Out of state support – mostly the beneficence of the Department of Defense -- has now declined seriously. In significant measure, it is likely a thing of the past, unless enormous new threats to national security arise. Thus, it seems that we Virginians must scramble to rebuild our economic strength. We'll need to scramble more than Virginia is accustomed to scrambling since the Second World War to expand existing businesses and attract new ones, to develop emerging

opportunities in technology and cybersecurity, to drive more international trade through our magnificent port, to lure more tourists to our extraordinary cultural and recreational attractions, to see to crucial infrastructure (highways, bridges and tunnels are high on the list), to do all sorts of things, including of course, figure out, soon, how to sustain our schools -- K12, community colleges, four year colleges and research universities.

None of this will be easy, and it will all take leadership. There simply isn't enough public money to go around. Creative problem solving, as well as new ways of doing business, will be essential.

You and I are in the business of leadership. We're in the wheelhouse charged with the responsibility and obligation to do our level best to make good things happen.

I believe citizens – people – care about being led, even when they seem to disdain leaders.

Political ambition, the determination to lead, is the bone marrow of a functioning democracy.

It's inescapable! Leaders matter. It's rare that anything out of the ordinary actually gets done unless a few people, leaders, cut through the fog of competing priorities and ever-present uncertainties, identify the key contemporary needs, and persuade people to move effectively to meet them.

Leaders do spot things that need to be done. They marshal the troops to pursue specific goals, they keep the chase going by helping those involved work out their conflicts and deal with the tradeoffs. Leaders keep morale high even when the going gets rough. And they strike a sound balance between visionary optimism, on the one hand, and inescapable realities on the other.

They don't let a quixotic search for the perfect stamp out the realization of the good. They don't confuse their own policy preferences with the matters of principle about which there can be no compromise. Indeed, they are masters of compromise when crucial to advance the mission. Constitutionally, and thus practically, compromise is essential to the functioning of our American government of shared powers among the branches.

So, Senators and Delegates of the august Commonwealth of Virginia, leaders, your mission is crucially important, and it's vital that you take great satisfaction from helping push our extraordinarily wonderful Commonwealth forward.

Along the way, it's seemly to draw strength and confidence from the fact that you do lead Virginia, the Old Dominion, which did come first among all the states in the union. We can drink deeply from the rich well of our Commonwealth's history and its pantheon of heroes. There is prestige and confidence in having been first. There is wisdom and staying power, grace under pressure, the calm dignity that comes from having been there, done that, and lived to tell the tale—all this and more accompanies temporal primacy.

But of course it's also important that we do all this in a non jackass-like fashion, without pomposity, with due regard for human frailty and the absurd. My maternal grandmother, whom I loved dearly, was a Virginia gentlewoman if ever there were one. Grandma was very interested in genealogy. It was she to whom all the family records and papers gravitated. Grandma also had a wicked sense of humor. She loved to tell a tale that I'll share and then subside.

There was a lady of new wealth who decided she needed to know her ancestors, the better to burnish her social standing. She



hired a genealogist. After a time he returned to report his findings. All was well, he said, with one exception. A great uncle, inconveniently, was a convicted murderer. He'd been executed in state prison, dying strapped in the electric chair. The newly wealthy, socially hopeful woman was aghast, aghast! Not to worry, said the genealogist. He'd handle it. Soon he returned with a beautiful leather-bound account of the lady's forebears. She anxiously turned to the passage about her murderous great uncle. It stated simply that he had held the chair of applied electricity at a leading state institution and died in harness.

In the beginning there was Virginia, friends, and Virginia led. So inspired, we must lead in our time.

Taylor Reveley  
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