

Past the Peak

Virginia's decline and the myth of American progress

by TED WIDMER

NEARLY 50 YEARS after declaring their independence, Americans were electrified by the triumphant return of the Marquis de Lafayette, eager to revisit the scenes of his youthful exploits. To those who remembered the dashing 19-year-old who had come to America's aid during the Revolution, Lafayette was difficult to recognize, with a heavy paunch and not much hair left. But to be fair, the feeling was mutual. Much of America was unrecognizable to him. In the North, large cities had sprung up, and the pace of life had quickened appreciably (Cambridge, Massachusetts, received middling praise as a "bustling village"). But the South was even more disorienting. As he journeyed to Virginia, the state where he had achieved his greatest tri-

umphs, he was flabbergasted to see that it had gone to seed. The proud birthplace of Washington, Jefferson, and Madison had degenerated into something of a backwater, with terrible roads, exhausted farms, and undisguised poverty.

That transformation is the subject of *Dominion of Memories*, an eloquent inquest by Susan Dunn, Ph.D. '73, professor of humanities at Williams College, into the forlorn story of our largest state in the early decades of the nineteenth century. This is a superb bit of local history, explicating the interlocking stories of regions, families, and new generations eager to leave their mark on the world. But it also manages to cast new light on the founders—no easy task—by showing them in a new context, as bewildered old men wandering a scarred landscape, Lear-

like, seeking to explain what it had all been about. Having survived the British, the French, and the British all over again, men like Jefferson and Madison were permitted (or perhaps condemned is a better word) to live long lives amid mediocre progeny who dimly understood the principles that they had fought for and, worse, tried to twist them into an elaborate justification for slavery, the labor system that single-handedly accounted for Virginia's decline.

Susan Dunn,
Dominion of Memories: Jefferson, Madison, and the Decline of Virginia
(Basic Books, \$27.50)

The topic is refreshing for many reasons. Virginia has always been essential, even in decline, to the nation that it did so much to found. To this day, one can tell a great deal about America's political weather by looking at conditions in polyglottish places like Fairfax County, cheek by jowl with the District of Columbia. But *Dominion of Memories* is appealing for the additional reason that so much of American history is assumed to be forward-moving. Progress, the most overused word in America's vo-

THEATER

Storytelling Spaces

Set designers like Derek McLane '80 are responsible for one of the chief joys of theatergoing: the inevitable surprise we feel when the curtain rises and we are thrust into a previously unimagined world. "A lot of times those first meetings that a director has with the designer are [the] first attempts the director makes to figure out the play, because suddenly the world has to be made physical," says McLane. "We sit down together and we say, 'How are we going to tell the story?'"

The first set McLane designed was for a production of *Guys and Dolls* in the Leverett House dining hall during his sophomore year at Harvard. "By the time we got the actors onstage," he remembers, "I felt like it was a calling. It was like being in love. I felt, viscerally, that this was something I had to go do."

After finishing Harvard, McLane earned an M.F.A. in drama at Yale with a concentration in design. Ever since, on stages from Seattle to London to Melbourne, his sets have given plays physical worlds to inhabit. He has won two OBIEs (Off Broadway Theater Awards) for "sustained achievement" and received a 2006 Tony nomination for

his design for the revival of the 1950s musical *The Pajama Game*. McLane has designed *The Voysey Inheritance* for David Mamet, *Macbeth* for New York City's Shakespeare in the Park, and six Stephen Sondheim musicals for the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.

While designing the set for *I Am My Own Wife*, the 2004 Pulitzer Prize-winning play by Doug Wright, McLane worried that the scenery, as originally written, was too explicitly metaphorical. The main character, a transvestite antiques collector living in Germany during the Cold War, was supposed to perform on a stage strewn with broken furniture. "If I see a play that takes place

then and the set is a bunch of destroyed furniture, to me that's post-Dresden fire-bombing," he says. "I thought that design put too much of an interpretation on the play to begin with. In some ways it needs to be more neutral than that, so you can discover and draw your own conclusions."

But some of the antiques doubled as important plot devices and needed to



Visit harvard-mag.com/extras to see more of McLane's designs and hear him describe their creation.



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cabulary, is never supposed to stop; yet here it ground to a halt. At the time of the founding, Virginia was the biggest state, and the most populous (one in five Americans lived there). It had the most splendid plantations, and arguably the two most impressive founders in Washington and Jefferson (Madison, not too far behind, was surely in the top five). Four of the first five presidents were Virginian, as was John Marshall, the greatest chief justice in the history of the Supreme Court. John Adams, no slouch when it came to defending New England, wrote, "We all look up to Virginia for examples." Henry Adams, as severe a judge of character as his great-grandfather, considered that the Virginians were "equal to any standard of excellence known to history."

But that standard quickly depreciated in the new century. Virginia's share in the national population plummeted as immigration flowed to northern states (it lost a seat in Congress in 1811, as Massachusetts is about to). Land values sank—the same size parcel of land was worth eight times more in the Northeast. Mount Vernon and Monticello began to crumble, lit-

eral symbols of dilapidation. (Dunn includes a striking photograph of an unkempt Monticello, looking like something out of *Hee Haw*). The local political system seemed broken as well—a deeply conservative state government resisted every possible act of progress, from roads to schools, and in 1820, even with a Virginian running for president, only 3 percent of those eligible cast votes. As the North and West began one of the great economic take-off periods in all of human history, Virginians devoted their energy to fighting progress, fiercely if necessary.

One problem was that this state, which had done so much to lead Americans toward democracy, had not developed a very deep democracy of its own. Power was firmly in the hands of the Tidewater elite, to the immense frustration (as Dunn finds in their words and writings) of the rising numbers living on the western side of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Most white males were disenfranchised, and many understood quite clearly that they were being shut out precisely so that they could not interfere with "the Slave Power."

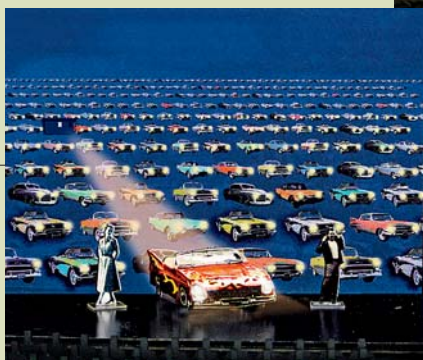
This led to deep frictions, and the eventual emergence of the state of West Virginia during the Civil War.

What makes the dilemma all the more fascinating is that two of the greatest theorists of democracy in American history were there watching it all unravel—powerless to stop it and, even worse, somewhat to blame. The story of Thomas Jefferson during the last 15 years of his life is more complex than the myth we have of the sage of Monticello, penning brilliant letters to John Adams and designing the University of Virginia (UVA). In fact, as Dunn makes clear, the great apostle of revolution underwent a series of intellectual revolutions of his own, bringing him closer to the interests of hard-line defenders of slavery: by the end of his life, and well afterwards, they lionized him as an ardent defender of Southern principles. It was not the most elegant final resting place for the author of the Declaration.

Opposite page: McLane's Tony-nominated set for the *Pajama Game*. Clockwise from left: From *Grease*, a model and a stage shot of Sandy and Danny at the drive-in. A model of the lockers from *Grease's* opening number

be onstage. McLane solved that problem by building a set with the necessary props—tables, cabinets, clocks, candelabras, and gramophones—cramming a wall of shelves that stretched outside the proscenium, suggesting that the survival story onstage was both personal and emblematic of postwar Germany as a whole.

Creating a unified pattern or texture out of seemingly mismatched pieces, such as a wall of antiques, has become a theme in McLane's work. His design for the current Broadway revival of *Grease* opens with a bank of student lockers in drab greens, grays, yellows, pinks, and blues. A 1950s advertisement for Westinghouse refrigerators, showing dozens of identical units in different colors, inspired the set. "With that kind of celebration of mass production there was also a certain amount of anonymity in the country," McLane says. "The high-school kids all struggle with anonymity, they all struggle with how do you not just be one of those refrigerators, one of those lockers?"



"When it's done right," he concludes, "you can't tell where the design begins and the direction leaves off, or vice versa. There's a seamless connection between those things." During the first number of *Grease*, when the locker doors burst open to reveal the students behind them, McLane's set highlights the characters' internal struggle against anonymity and places it center stage. The set does what he wants all his sets to do: it tells the story.

—PAUL GLEASON



“It was as if the former president and coauthor of *The Federalist* had not even spoken.”

Dunn argues quite convincingly that Jefferson's effort to found the University of Virginia was more parochial than we remember: he was desperate to find a way to inoculate young Virginians against the ideas they were learning at Harvard and other subversive places. Harvard, he fretted, converted students into “fanatics and Tories”—an outrageous charge when what he truly feared was the opposite: students able to reason for themselves. The early UVA was hardly a citadel of academic free-

dom: in fact, student speeches were banned after one brave Virginian gave an anti-slavery address on Jefferson's birthday. (Harvard continued to attract Southerners; nearly 300 of its alumni would fight for the Confederacy.)

James Madison also had a bumpy road to travel in his final years. Not as outspoken as Jefferson, but still devoted to his caste, he sided with the Tidewater elite when push came to shove, and did little to advance the claims of ordinary Virgini-

ans to a share in the political process. In 1829, at Virginia's first constitutional convention since 1776, he spoke before a bitterly divided audience and his remarks not only failed to unite the delegates, they were so quiet that he was essentially inaudible. “It was,” Dunn writes, “as if the former president and coauthor of *The Federalist* had not even spoken.”

The problem, of course, was slavery: the system that implacably opposed all efforts to change it. Madison understood this quite clearly, and wrote that “slavery and farming are incompatible.” But the most reasonable man in America was powerless to reason his way out of the predicament. It would

have helped Dunn's argument to hear African-American voices more loudly, but even without them, she makes the point that slavery corroded every aspect of this proud state's existence, to the point where Virginia was itself enslaved. The story of the commonwealth's rise, fall, and subsequent rise again offers a helpful lesson to a nation with a habit of taking good news for granted. ▢

Ted Widmer '84, Ph.D. '93, director of the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University, edited the two American Speeches volumes of political oratory in the Library of America. His next book, Ark of the Liberties: America and the World, will be published this summer.

Suzanne Ekman hopes someone can identify a source for the following line, possibly from a Mark Van Doren poem: “...but where were you?”

Perry Miles asks which author, when queried about whether any difference existed between the “tyranny of the left and that of the right,” replied, “It is the difference between dogs and cats” (or words to that effect).

Chapter & Verse

Correspondence on not-so-famous lost words

“inglorious Miltons” (May-June 2006). Richard Barbieri forwards a copy of the poem “After Sending Freshmen to Describe a Tree.” He thinks that its author, Robert Hogan, may be the late editor of the *Dictionary of Irish Literature*, a longtime professor at the University of Delaware.

The 10-line work begins, “Twenty inglorious Miltons looked at a tree and saw God,” and ends, “Not one of the Miltons saw any trees./If you must see a tree,

clean, clear, and bright,/For God's sake and mine, look outside your heart and write.”

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