

Dear Friends,

Greetings from Washington DC, where I have landed after a week's tourism in south central Virginia. I was touring here because I wanted to finish the last of the Virginia counties before my annual visit to friends and family in Washington, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York and Massachusetts.

Virginia is one of the hardest states for a county-collector to complete, because state law provides that when a city incorporates, it ceases to be part of the county it was in, and becomes instead a free-standing independent city. So in addition to going to all 95 counties, to finish the state I had to touch down in all 39 independent cities too, for a total of 134 jurisdictions. This is a little easier than it used to be, as a few Virginia independent cities have surrendered their charters so as to get back into counties with their conveniently provided schools and courts and jails and roads. But not much easier.

I was almost done anyway, though – I had only 15 counties and 3 independent cities to go, and except for one outlier (Harrisonburg City) they were all neatly clustered together. I could have driven like a maniac and done it in a couple of days, but I thought it would be better to take longer and combine it with some tourism. So I planned a relatively relaxed week on the road, averaging only 100 miles a day, with one or two historic sights along the way each day. It was still the work of a maniac, but not as hurried or stressful.

So I flew to Washington's Dulles Airport, out in the exurbs of northern Virginia, and spent the night in Leesburg. The next morning, April 9, I presented myself, by appointment, at Dodona Manor, the Leesburg home of General of the Army George C. Marshall, ordinarily closed on Fridays but opened just for me.

Marshall bought the home in 1941 and lived in it while running the war and later serving as Truman's Secretary of State and Defense, and indeed until he died in 1959. Marshall was a great man, but his house was not all that interesting, and it was rather heavy on tacky presents from Mme. Chiang Kai-shek. This theme – great man, boring house – was to be repeated often during my Virginia trip.



After I left Leesburg, and before continuing on to Harrisonburg, I took a detour a few miles north to White's Ferry. There has been a ferry here since 1817, and this is the last one still operating of the hundred or so ferries which used to cross the Potomac. It is a car ferry now, and runs on gasoline, but except for that the crossing was probably much the same experience it used to be. The ferry is still called the *Jubal A. Early* (after the confederate general), as White's boat was after the Woah Between The States. It was a peaceful scene, gliding across the wide brown river

from one green shore to the other. When we landed in Maryland I drove off and then drove right back on for the return trip.

From White's Ferry I made my way to Front Royal and turned onto the Skyline Drive, which follows the crest of the Blue Ridge Mountains through Shenandoah National Park. Instead of paying the \$15 entrance fee, I bought a Senior Pass for \$10, which entitles me to free admission to all National Park Service properties for the rest of my life, or until I stop being a senior. I drove along this beautiful road, which was built (let the record show) as a job-creating economic stimulus measure during the Depression, and which runs through some of the loveliest country in the world. I wanted to mosey rather than zip, so I drove in second gear, which kept me to 25 MPH or so, and stopped every so often at the conveniently placed overlooks to admire the scene below. The view over the Shenandoah Valley looked like a Civil War diorama, with woods for armies to hide in, and streams for them to ford, and 19th century villages and farmhouses and fenced-in farmyards for them to fight over, as indeed they did. There were hardly any cars on the road, and the quiet of the valley was broken only by the call of a distant rooster and the barking of a dog, carried on the gentle wind from far below.

I spent the night in HARRISONBURG CITY, and paid a melancholy visit to the elderly relatives of one of my imprisoned clients. The next day I passed through Staunton, eccentrically pronounced *Stanton*, and stopped to see the dreary red brick manse where Woodrow Wilson was born in 1856. He left 18 months later, and I can understand why. Great man (although a stuffed shirt and a racist), boring house. But his gleaming 1919 Pierce-Arrow limousine, complete with crystal side-lamps, which he bought from the government when he left office in 1921, was well worth seeing. I will forgive the anachronistic 50-star flags. Just this once.

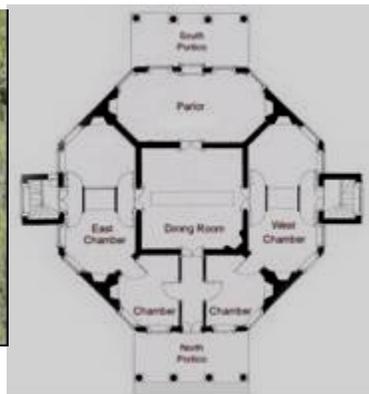


After Staunton the new counties started: NELSON, AMHERST, CAMPBELL, LYNCHBURG CITY. I decided to stay in Lynchburg, rather than continue on to Bedford as originally planned, in order to see Jefferson's Poplar Forest. My motel in Lynchburg was right across the street from Jerry Falwell's Thomas Road Baptist Church, oddly enough not on Thomas Road. I avoided the Jerry Falwell Museum, and even "Liberty University's newest eatery, Doc's Diner, opened in 2008 as a tribute to the late Dr. Jerry Falwell." It was not hard at all to skip these attractions, even though I had to pass up "Doc's Country-Fried Breakfast and the Elmer Float." Let this float pass from me.

The next morning I went to Poplar Forest, which is not a forest (although it's in one) but an exquisite *boîte* of a country house Jefferson built on a plantation two days ride (or three days by coach) from Monticello (now of course only about an hour's drive away).

This was where he liked to go, after he left office in 1809, to relax for a month or so at a time, away from the constant stream of visitors at Monticello. It is basically nothing more than a small octagon, with four chambers (one divided by a hallway) surrounding a skylit central 20-foot cube, and porches at the front and back. But it is so charming, and so graceful, and so economically and beautifully proportioned, and so well integrated with its surroundings as seen through floor-to-ceiling triple-hung sash windows, that a person wants nothing more than to settle in with a good book and never leave. That's certainly how Jefferson felt – he wrote in 1812 that “when finished, it will be the best dwelling house in the state, except that of Monticello; perhaps preferable to that, as more proportioned to the faculties of a private citizen.”

And that is how it turned out. Monticello is brilliant in conception and noble in elevation, but some of its rooms are rather cramped, and it is built on a much grander scale. Poplar Forest is less ambitious but more perfectly realized – by the time he built this house Jefferson was a mature architect and had long mastered his ancient models (Vitruvius and Palladio). Here he was able to distill everything he had learned into one flawless building, ideal for a person living alone in retirement surrounded by books and of course a couple of dozen helpful slaves. “I have fixed myself comfortably,” he wrote, “keep some books here, bring others occasionally, am in the solitude of a hermit, and quite at leisure to attend to my absent friends.” It is the perfect country house, one of the most beautiful buildings I've ever been in, and by far the best thing I saw on this trip. Here are some pictures and a floor plan (as in Monticello, Jefferson's own chamber is divided by an alcove bed placed in the middle of the room). Some of the poplar trees, now approaching 250 feet high, remain from his time.



I pressed on through the Appalachian spring – BEDFORD, BEDFORD CITY, FRANKLIN. Some trees were in flower: white blossoms on dogwood, yellow ones on witch hazel, pink and white crabapple flowers and gaudy redbud. Others were still bare, or just budding or coming into leaf, their foliage not yet hiding their structures as they covered whole hillsides and mountains. Light green and yellow green, and darker green of pine and spruce, black-brown boughs. Birdsong. Rabbits below and hawks above. Virginia cardinals. Spring never seemed more hopeful.



My next stop was the Booker T. Washington National Monument, built at his birthplace in Hardy, VA. The slave cabin where he was born no longer exists, but recreations of similar buildings give the feeling of the place Washington described so vividly in *Up From Slavery* (1901). Below is a picture of the recreated cabins – the building on the right is the kitchen where his mother worked. In the visitor center there is a very affecting bronze sculpture illustrating the scene in 1865 when an unknown white man came to the plantation, read out the Emancipation Proclamation, and told the slaves they were free to go. Eight-year-old Booker and his mother left a few days later to join his stepfather in West Virginia. I can't find a picture of the sculpture, but here is an illustration from an early edition of *Up From Slavery* – Washington is shown as a small child with a slouch hat and a stick.



CHARLOTTE, APPOMATTOX, and I arrived at the place of the Surrender. It is a smallish parlor in a fairly imposing two-story brick house next door to the old courthouse. Many of the buildings of the former village of Appomattox Court House are preserved, and they make an evocative period group. Here's the building, called the McLean House, and a somewhat imaginative artist's impression of the scene by Keith Rocco. The furnishings, almost all reconstructions, are based on contemporary drawings and displaced originals, but the room feels much smaller than Rocco shows it.



At Appomattox I was at the last stop on Lee's retreat from Richmond, described so brilliantly from contemporary sources in Burke Davis' *To Appomattox: Nine April Days 1865* (1959). As I continued through my remaining counties I followed the path of the Confederate retreat and the Union pursuit, but going the other way. It was April again, as it was back then, and except for paved roads and telephone poles a lot of it looked much as it must have then – the same brick and frame buildings still standing, the same little streams and stands of poplar and hickory, the same (or at least similar) farms and pastures and woodlots. I kept to the old roads, with names like Old Stage Road and Plank Road and Old Turnpike, and roads named for the villages or landmarks they lead to. I passed Sayler's Creek, site of the last battle of the campaign; at Farmville, a crucial point on the retreat, a beautiful girl served me a barbeque sandwich for lunch, with cole slaw and iced tea. BUCKINGHAM, CUMBERLAND, PRINCE EDWARD, NOTTOWAY, AMELIA, POWHATAN, GOOCHLAND, FLUVANNA, and there was Virginia completed. Twenty-five states finished, 25 more to go.

From there on it was anticlimax – more examples of great man, boring house. Monroe's Ash Lawn-Highland was an uninspiring conglomeration of smaller houses, furnished in drab period style. Nearby Monticello is a great building, and not at all boring, but something of a letdown after what seemed to me the much superior Poplar Forest (there's a nice new modern visitor center, though, at a respectful distance, with good exhibits and a shuttle bus). Madison's Montpelier, very pricey at \$18, was impressive but mostly unfurnished, and while big for its time and historically important was not particularly distinguished architecturally. The Madison Museum in Orange and the Monroe Museum in Fredericksburg were hardly even worth stopping to see – the so-called James Monroe Law Office was not even a recreation of his law office, which was never on the site.



I ended my tourism on April 15 at the shiny new National Museum of the Marine Corps, next to the great base at Quantico – there was a lot to see there, including some very effective life-sized tableaux of combat scenes. But I was a bit touristed out by then, and glad to return my car and let someone else drive for a while as I rode into Washington in a taxicab. Washington was looking its most leafily beautiful, its humid streets steamy after a rain, as I began the next stage of my trip.

More later. Back May 29.

David

April 2010