

Virginia

The Old Dominion

by Jean Kirschenmann

Virginia is a state of contrasts—from the suburbs of Washington, D.C., in northern Virginia to the Great Dismal Swamp in the south and from the scenic mountaintops in the west to the beachside resorts along its eastern shore. Virginia became a state in 1788, the tenth state to join the Union. Virginia's complex story is closely tied to the story of the United States, but it also has several chapters all its own.

Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains, some of the oldest mountains in the world, have been worn down over time, taking on the appearance of gently rolling hills.



Geography

Virginia is the twelfth largest state in the United States in terms of population with just over 7,700,000 people, and it is 35th in terms of area with approximately 42,800 square miles of land. This makes Virginia similar in size and population to the country of Switzerland.

Virginia has three major geographic regions. These regions have played, and continue to play, a central role in the history, commerce, and social life of the people who live in them.

The state capitol building in Richmond was originally designed by Thomas Jefferson, third president of the United States.



The Tidewater

The Chesapeake Bay, which is 200 miles long, cuts deep into the eastern coast of the United States. The flat lands that border it are known as the Tidewater. This region takes its name from the fact that the ocean tides reach into the waters of the bay. The Eastern Shore of Virginia—actually a peninsula separated from the rest of Virginia by the Chesapeake Bay—shelters the bay from the sometimes turbulent waters of the Atlantic Ocean. Over 40 rivers empty into the Chesapeake Bay, making it a vast estuary where fresh water from rivers mingles with the salty water of the ocean.

In the southeastern corner of the Tidewater lies the Great Dismal Swamp. It was named by early British explorers who found it to be a mysterious and frightening place. Today, it is a noted wildlife refuge and home to a wide range of fauna from newts to black bears. At the center of the swamp is Lake Drummond, a rather large natural lake, one of only two in Virginia. (All other lakes in Virginia were made by damming up rivers and streams.)

Virginia's major centers of population are also located in the Tidewater. These include the state's largest city and resort center, Virginia Beach, and the nearby port cities of Norfolk and Newport News.

The Piedmont

The word *piedmont* comes from the French language and means, literally, "the foot of the mountain." Indeed, the Piedmont of Virginia is a series of gentle rolling hills increasing in elevation as one travels west from the Tidewater region to the Blue Ridge Mountains. The major city of the Piedmont is Richmond, a city of about 200,000 and Virginia's capital since 1780. Besides the usual government offices found in any capital city, Richmond is known for its beautiful historic buildings,

quality museums, and art galleries. The state capitol building was designed by Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States. In 1888, the first successful streetcar system in the world began operation in Richmond.

The Mountain and Valley Region

Two mountain ranges, the scenic Blue Ridge Mountains and the more rugged Allegheny Mountains, part of the Appalachian Mountain Range, form the western edge of Virginia. These mountain ranges are among the oldest in the world. Because time and the elements have worn them down, they are not as tall as some other mountain chains; nevertheless, they hold breathtaking scenery. These two mountain ranges are separated by the Shenandoah River Valley.

Climate

Virginia has the full range of seasonal changes that are typical of temperate zone climates. Summertime can be hot and humid, and winter can bring some snowy days. However, for the most part, Virginia's climate is moderated by its latitude and its location on the Atlantic coast.

The various geographical regions of the state have different weather patterns. While Tidewater Virginia may see only a few inches of snow each winter, the mountainous region may get several feet. Similarly, the growing season in the Tidewater can be as long as eight months compared to only five in the west. Beach lovers may be enjoying the sun in Virginia Beach at the same time that winter sports enthusiasts are skiing in the mountains.

A Brief History of Virginia

When Europeans began to explore the New World in the late 1500s, Native Americans were living in the area that is

now Virginia. They hunted deer and turkey and raised corn, squash, beans, and a crop that would later have a major impact on Virginia—tobacco. They had formed governments, alliances, and empires long before Europeans visited the region. French and Spanish explorers were the first Europeans to visit this area, but they did not establish permanent settlements. At the time, England was experiencing tensions from population growth, religious conflict, and a growing rivalry with Spain. Establishing British colonies in the Western Hemisphere was seen as a way to challenge Spain and provide economic opportunity for Englishmen.

In numerous attempts over several decades, the English tried to establish a

Tobacco, which grows well in Virginia's climate, became the number one crop in the 1600s. Colonists made a profit selling their tobacco in England.





© SHUTTERSTOCK

The Virginia state quarter commemorates the 400th anniversary of the establishment of the settlement at Jamestown in 1607 as well as the year Virginia became a state (1788).

colony near present-day Virginia and North Carolina. More than once, they chose places plagued by malaria-carrying mosquitoes or arrived too late in the year to plant food before winter. More than once, men became distracted from building a settlement by the dream of finding riches. Twice, settlers who remained in the colony disappeared before the next ship arrived from England. What happened to these lost colonies is still the subject of legend and archaeological study.

Finally, in 1607, a British settlement was founded 60 miles upriver from the Chesapeake Bay at a site the colonists called Jamestown in honor of their king, James I. With the strong leadership of Captain John Smith and the aid of the Powhatan Indians, Jamestown survived and became the first permanent British settlement in the New World.

In 1613, a planter in that settlement, John Rolfe, sent the first shipment of Virginia tobacco to England, where it immediately became popular. In Virginia tobacco

grew well both in the Tidewater, where it was grown on large estates owned by wealthy landowners, and in the Piedmont, where it was grown on smaller farms and homesteads owned by frontiersmen and freed servants. Thus tobacco came to be the number one industry in Virginia and remained so for many years.

In 1619, Virginia became the first colony to have elected government officials when Virginians elected representatives to serve as their legislators in a body they called the House of Burgesses.

In the latter half of the 18th century, political and economic tensions grew between Britain and its colonies in North America. Still, many Virginians continued to think of themselves as British. From 1773 to 1775, Virginians and other colonists debated whether to remain loyal to Britain or to declare themselves independent. In 1776, representatives from all of the colonies met in Philadelphia. Virginians played an important role in these meetings. Richard Henry Lee submitted a motion to declare the colonies' independence. Thomas Jefferson was chief author of the Declaration of Independence, the document that formally declared the thirteen colonies independent from Great Britain, naming them the United States of America.

When the American Revolutionary War broke out, George Washington, from Virginia, was asked to lead the Continental Army in its fight against Britain. The war with Britain ended in 1783, and the new nation was established.

By 1787 it was clear that the new nation had a weak national government. James Madison, another Virginian, presented a blueprint for the new constitution. Madison's plan provided for a stronger central government and defined the country as a union of semi-independent states. Representatives from Virginia

Manassas National Battlefield Park, shown here, is the site of two major battles of the American Civil War. Nearly half of all Civil War battles were fought in Virginia.



© SHUTTERSTOCK

proposed amending the Constitution by adding a Bill of Rights, similar to the one that was already in the Virginia constitution. These ten amendments guarantee all citizens freedom of speech, religion, and other individual rights. After the Constitution was ratified, George Washington was elected the first president of the United States of America.

Late in the 18th century, the soil of Virginia began to wear out, and tobacco growers faced difficult times. They brought in more laborers to extract tobacco from the tired land, so by 1790 there were almost as many slaves in Virginia as there were free people. Like the rest of the nation, Virginians were conflicted about the issue of slavery. Some believed that slavery had to be ended on moral grounds. Others felt the issue should be decided individually by each state. The debate grew more heated, and the two sides grew more polarized. Eventually, eleven states, including Virginia, broke away from the United States to form the Confederate States of America.

The southern Confederate states fought the northern states (the Union) in the American Civil War, which began in 1861. Nearly half of all Civil War battles were fought in Virginia, and, for much of the war, Richmond, Virginia, served as the capital of the Confederacy. In 1865, the North won the war, and Confederate General Robert E. Lee surrendered to the Union commander, General Ulysses S. Grant, in a village in Virginia called Appomattox Court House.

At Work in Virginia

Nearly half a million Virginians are employed in manufacturing, producing a wide array of products—from furniture, textiles, computer components, electrical equipment, chemicals, and paper prod-



© SHUTTERSTOCK

ucts, to warships. Virginia is home to two of the largest shipyards in the world, the Norfolk Naval Shipyard and the Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Company. Military installations are also major employers of residents of Virginia.

Because of northern Virginia's close proximity to the national capital, a significant number of Virginians are employed in federal government offices and in the construction industry that supports the growing population and government infrastructure in that part of the state. Since Washington, D.C., and Virginia are world-renowned tourist destinations, many Virginians are also employed in the hospitality and service sector.

Although agriculture is no longer Virginia's largest industry, many Virginians are still engaged in part-time farming or fishing. Poultry, dairy goods, and cattle have become large sources of agricultural income. Tobacco continues to be a lucrative crop; grains, corn, soybeans, peanuts, and sweet potatoes are also grown. Both apples from the orchards in northern Virginia and Smithfield hams from the James River estuary are world famous. The Chesapeake Bay was once the home of a thriving seafood industry, but over-fishing has forced many fishermen to look for other sources of income.

A Navy ship docks in Norfolk Naval Shipyard, one of the largest shipyards in the world and an important employer in Virginia.



This life-sized statue of George Washington stands in the rotunda of the state capitol in Richmond, surrounded by busts of the other seven U.S. presidents who came from Virginia.

Symbols of Virginia

All states in the United States have nicknames. Virginia is known as The Old Dominion. This name dates from the 1600s, when the settlers in Virginia remained loyal to King Charles II during the English Civil War. As a reward, the king raised Virginia's status to dominion (along with England, Scotland, Ireland, and France). Because it was the oldest of King Charles's settlements in America, Virginia took the name "The Old Dominion."

Another nickname for Virginia is Mother of Presidents, which refers to the fact that more presidents have come from Virginia than from any other state, eight altogether. Four of the first five U.S. presidents were Virginians: George Washington (who was president from



Above: The northern cardinal, a common songbird of the eastern United States, is the Virginia state bird.

Right: The flowering dogwood is both the state tree and state flower of Virginia. Dogwoods can have either white or pink flowers.

Far right: The oyster has been designated as Virginia's state shell.



1789 to 1797), Thomas Jefferson (1801–1809), James Madison (1809–1817), and James Monroe (1817–1825). Their leadership and service were critical during the formative years of the young country. The other four presidents from Virginia were William Henry Harrison (1841), John Tyler (1841–1845), Zachary Taylor (1849–1850), and Woodrow Wilson (1913–1921).

Like other states, Virginia has chosen special symbols to showcase particular features of the state. The Virginia state bird is the northern cardinal, a common songbird found throughout the eastern United States. The male cardinal is particularly easy to spot because he is covered with bright red plumage, including a red crest atop his head.

Most states name both a state tree and a state flower, but Virginia is one of only three states to name the same plant as both its state tree and flower—the beautiful flowering dogwood. Its flowers come in pink and white varieties and bloom for a short time in early spring. Dogwood flowers are easy to recognize by their four distinctively shaped petals, each with a small notch or cleft. Although the dogwood is not a large tree, its wood is strong and useful for making wooden tools.

The Chesapeake Bay was once home to a thriving shellfish industry. Thus, it is no surprise that the oyster has been designated as Virginia's state shell. Virginia has also chosen a state boat related to the shellfish industry. It has the peculiar name of deadrise, which refers to the angle of the underside of the boat. The flat-bottomed Virginia *deadrise* is particularly well suited to the shallow waters of the Chesapeake Bay and the heavy equipment that fishermen use to trap and haul in their catches of crabs, oysters, and fish.





© SHUTTERSTOCK

Tourist Attractions and Activities

About 750,000 tourists visit Virginia every year. Their destinations fall into two main categories—places of natural beauty and recreation and places related to history and government. Scenic recreational areas and protected natural habitats can be found all across the state, from the Eastern Shore to the scenic Blue Ridge Parkway. The sites described below are a few of the most popular among visitors to Virginia.

The Great Dismal Swamp straddles the Virginia and North Carolina border. As a young man, George Washington worked as a surveyor and explored nearly every region in Virginia, including the Great Dismal Swamp. He saw economic

potential in its vast stands of cypress trees and was one of the first to attempt to drain water from the swamp to harvest its timber. Draining the swamp proved to be difficult, yet loggers built roads to gain access to the timber. These and other human activities altered the ecosystem; over time, the swamp and its resources shrank until the 1970s, when pressure from environmental groups led the Union Camp paper corporation to donate nearly 50,000 acres of the swamp to conservation. Today the protected area is even larger, and the mission of conservationists is to restore the swamp, as much as possible, to its original state. The Great Dismal Swamp is a favorite destination for bikers, hikers, birders, and fishermen.

The Blue Ridge Parkway is among the most visited places in the U.S. National Park system. This parkway winds along the crest of the Blue Ridge Mountains, stretching almost 500 miles from Shenandoah National Park in Virginia to the Great Smoky Mountains in North Carolina.

Left: The brilliant fall colors of Shenandoah National Park attract many visitors to the park each year.

Below: Shenandoah National Park, seen here from the Blue Ridge Parkway, is one of Virginia's many places of natural beauty.



© SHUTTERSTOCK



Monticello, the home of Thomas Jefferson, was designed by Jefferson himself. Built and rebuilt over the course of 40 years, Monticello was completed in 1809.

The Parkway, begun as a public works project during the 1930s Depression, took more than 50 years to complete. This road is known for its scenic beauty; thus visitor information notices urge travelers to “enjoy the drive but watch the road.” The Parkway connects dozens of charming communities and historical sites, including some of the oldest known pre-historic sites and early European settlements in North America.

Other must-see destinations lie within Virginia’s mountains. These mountains contain limestone, which dissolves in water; over time, rain and rivers have carved huge caves and unusual rock formations out of the rocks. Natural Bridge, one of the most famous of such spots, is an arch just over 200 feet high carved out of the mountain by the elements. George Washington etched his initials in the rock there, and Thomas Jefferson’s family once owned the site. Today Natural Bridge is a National Historic Landmark.

Another famous destination is Luray Caverns, the largest series of caves in the

eastern United States. Millions of years old, the caverns were discovered in 1878, and they became a travel destination soon after that. Visitors are amazed by the stalactites and stalagmites, some of which reach 140 feet in length. In 1954, an enterprising mathematician and electronics engineer, Leland Sprinkle, created what is known as the world’s largest organ in one of the caves. Called the Great Stalacpipe Organ, the instrument produces music when carefully engineered mallets strike stalactites in the cavernous room.

History buffs could never visit all of the points of interest that Virginia has to offer. Arlington National Cemetery in northern Virginia, just outside Washington, D.C., is the resting place of national and political heroes, including John F. Kennedy and Robert Kennedy. Museums and historic sites dot the state and preserve the stories of former presidents and other colonial leaders. Thomas Jefferson’s home, Monticello, near Charlottesville, Virginia, is arguably the most famous. There visitors see and learn that Jefferson was a thinker, a writer, an inventor, an architect, a farmer, a traveler, and a man with a complex personal life that is still the subject of public interest and debate. Another popular estate in Virginia is Mount Vernon, the beloved home of George Washington in his adult years, located near Alexandria, Virginia, on the Potomac River. Visitors can stroll through the gardens, tour the home and outbuildings, and view artifacts from George Washington’s life (including his wooden dentures) in the education center.

Civil War battlegrounds and sites that played key roles in colonial times are also popular visitor destinations. The historic site known as Colonial Williamsburg is one of the world’s best living museums. In 1920, the millionaire philanthropist



© SHUTTERSTOCK

John D. Rockefeller took an interest in the history of Williamsburg and founded an organization dedicated to restoring much of the town to its colonial period form. Today visitors tour fully restored homes, mansions, shops, and inns and observe, or even participate in, colonial era crafts such as barrel making and blacksmithing. Visitors also learn about the lives of slaves and freed blacks who made up half of the population of colonial Williamsburg. Archaeological work and other forms of research are ongoing, and a Powhatan Indian village has been re-created nearby.

Websites of Interest

Assateague Island National Seashore
www.assateagueisland.com

This website provides information not only about the ponies of Assateague Island but also about the ongoing work of conservationists on the Eastern Shore, as well as recreational activities and travel to and from the island.

Colonial Williamsburg
www.history.org

The official website for Colonial Williamsburg, this site is rich with information and stunning photography showing many facets of life and work in this living museum. Information for teachers includes lesson plans.

Mount Vernon, the former estate of George Washington, is a popular tourist destination. Visitors enjoy touring the home and outbuildings and strolling through the gardens.



© SHUTTERSTOCK

A horse-drawn carriage passes the Governor's Palace in Colonial Williamsburg, a restored colonial town that is now a popular living museum.

Commonwealth of Virginia

www.virginia.gov

This site, the official website of the state of Virginia, has links to information ranging from government to tourism and travel. The “Facts and History” section provides many layers of information.

National Park Service

www.nps.gov/state/va

The National Park Service (NPS) oversees wildlife habitats, historic sites, and places of beauty set aside for the enjoyment and education of visitors. This site has links to all the sites administered by the NPS in Virginia and includes information for teachers.

Virginia Presidents

www.virginia.org/site/features.asp?featureid=94

Eight U.S. presidents were born in Virginia; information about their lives, their presidencies, and their homes is available at this Virginia tourism website.

JEAN KIRSCHENMANN is an assistant professor in the TESL program at Hawai'i Pacific University in Honolulu. She is particularly interested in teacher training and materials development for EFL settings. She has lived and worked in China, Micronesia, Japan, and Romania.

The Ponies of Assateague Island

Assateague Island is the largest of Virginia's Eastern Shore islands. It is a wildlife refuge and home to thousands of birds that live on the island or use it as a stopping-off point on their annual migrations to warmer or cooler climates. However, the most famous residents of Assateague Island are about 150 semi-wild horses, more often called ponies. The Assateague ponies are known for their intelligence, colorful beauty, and their ability to adapt to life on the marshy, sandy islet where they feed on wild grasses, typically in groups of five to ten.

The Assateague ponies are biologically related to Spanish horses, although it is unclear how they originally came to Assateague Island. One story is that they are descended from Spanish horses that survived an offshore shipwreck in the 1500s. Another story suggests that they are descended from Spanish work animals that later interbred with British horses. Today the states of Maryland and Virginia, in cooperation with the National Park

Service, share ownership and management of the parks, wildlife, and the pony herds on Assateague Island.

In the last week of July every year, the Virginia ponies become the center of attention in an annual ritual that attracts thousands of local residents and tourists. Early in the week, the ponies are rounded up and examined. On Wednesday they are herded to the shore, from which they swim about five to ten minutes across a narrow channel to Chincoteague Island. The next day, most of the foals are auctioned off to keep the herd from growing beyond a size that the resources of the island can sustain. A few young ponies are kept in the herd for breeding purposes. The money earned from the auction pays for the support of the ponies and for local government services. On Friday, the remaining ponies are herded back to their home on Assateague Island.

The story of the ponies was made famous in a 1947 book by Marguerite Henry entitled *Misty of Chincoteague*, which has become a children's classic.



Semi-wild horses walk along the sandy shore of Assateague Island.