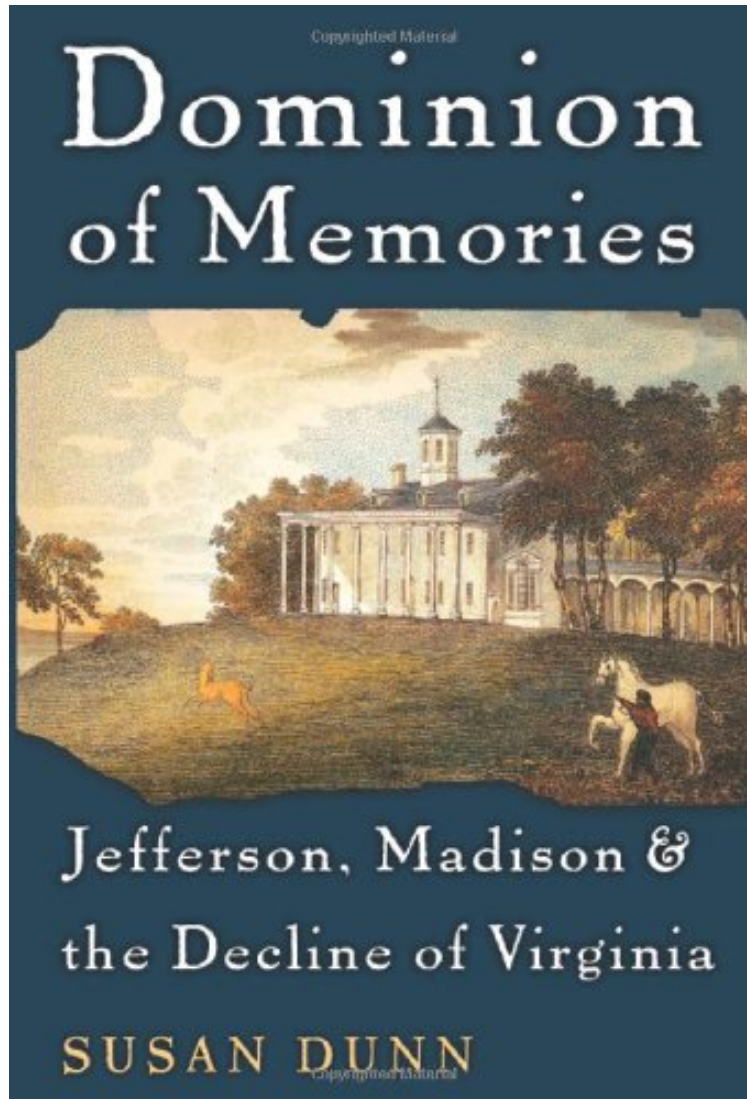


[Download] Dominion of Memories: Jefferson, Madison, and the Decline of Virginia

Dominion of Memories: Jefferson, Madison, and the Decline of Virginia

Susan Dunn

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Susan Dunn : Dominion of Memories: Jefferson, Madison, and the Decline of Virginia before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Dominion of Memories: Jefferson, Madison, and the Decline of Virginia:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. The American NightmareBy GregThis book tells the story of Virginia's strengthening embrace of slavery after the Revolution and its accompanying economic, political and civil

decline. It uses the writings of Jefferson and Madison to show their compromise with what they abhorred. The perverse right-wing arguments that spill off of every page all seem quite modern; the interplay of the beliefs of racial superiority, state and individual rights, fulfilling religious mandates. The economic reliance on the slave trade with the newer states lead to the diminishment of agriculture and the rejection of manufacturing. Jefferson's calculations of his estates' revenues show an increasing reliance on breeding and selling slaves, perhaps including his own grandchildren. Once the slave owning society accepted the lie of their superiority, they became less capable of applying rational thought to their other problems. The Virginia estate owners, almost all of whom destroyed their land with slash and burn farming, could not understand why the farms on neighboring Pennsylvania prospered while theirs declined. While the Virginians rationalized their position as fulfilling God's plan to aid and enlighten the less fortunate, they hated the Missouri Compromise not because it limited the spread of slavery but because it meant that Virginia's population of blacks would continue to increase.

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. The Decline of Virginia By Leonard J. Wilson In *Dominion of Memories*, Susan Dunn analyzes the decline of Virginia between the Revolutionary and Civil Wars. Virginians were elected President in eight of the first nine presidential elections, 1788-1820. In the census of 1790, Virginia was the most populous state and controlled 19 of 105 seats in the US House of Representatives, 18% of the total, and 21 of 131 electoral votes, 16% of the total. From that high point, Virginia's influence in the federal government steadily decreased. Today the state controls 11 of 413 seats in the House, 2.5%, and 13 of 535 electoral votes, 2.4%. What happened? Professor Dunn identifies several factors that contributed to this decline in Virginia's population and influence, including:

1. The dominance of agriculture in the economy
2. Slavery
3. Lack of liquid capital assets
4. Failure to develop manufacturing, commercial, and financial parts of the economy
5. Inadequate transportation infrastructure (roads and canals)
6. Inadequate educational opportunities
7. Disproportionate electoral control by the eastern plantation owners

These seven factors are highly interrelated, each tending to reinforce the others. Together, they caused a significant degree of economic, political, and social stagnation. That stagnation coupled with inexpensive land in the west resulted in a major outward migration of Virginians, which is also described in David Hackett Fischer's book, *Bound Away*. Large scale plantation agriculture based on slavery appears to be the root of the other factors. Perhaps Jefferson's reverence for the Yeoman Farmer contributed to the dependence on agriculture, but I think that the real root lies deeper. Eastern Virginia was heavily settled during the English Civil War by Royalist sympathizers from the rural areas in the south and west of England. The western parts of Virginia were settled later by Scots-Irish who also came from rural areas. In contrast, New England and the Middle Colonies were settled by Puritans from East Anglia and Quakers from the Midlands of England, respectively. Both of these latter groups were more compatible with non-agricultural skills such as commerce, manufacturing, and finance. (See David Hackett Fischer's *Albion's Seed* for details.) The Revolutionary Generation of Virginians included an inordinate number of exceptional leaders: Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Marshall, Monroe, Wythe, Mason. They came of age under the influence of the Enlightenment philosophies of Locke, Hume, Adam Smith, Blackstone, etc, (as described in Donald Lutz's *The Origins of American Constitutionalism*). They were also the products of a closed and elite system of selection and advancement of colonial leaders (described in Charles Sydnor's *American Revolutionaries in the Making*). Their successor generations seem to have included far fewer exceptional leaders. Perhaps their capabilities merely reverted to the mean. Perhaps the intellectual influence of the Enlightenment was not as strong. Perhaps the less structured post-colonial system of advancement was not as effective in developing and advancing exceptional leaders. In any event, the leaders of Virginia's state government from 1800 forward were not of the same caliber as the Revolutionary Generation.

Professor Dunn has produced a well written and researched book that is a valuable addition to the works I've cited above. There are a few minor points I'd dispute:

1. Madison's presidential veto of the Bonus Bill for the construction of roads and canals impacted all states and does not explain Virginia's decline.
2. New York's success in building the Erie Canal and Virginia's failure to complete canals connecting the James and Potomac Rivers to the Ohio are not comparable. The Erie Canal has a total rise in elevation of only 585 feet in 363 miles while the proposed canals in Virginia would have had to cross the Appalachian Mountains.

However, these really are minor points that in no way detract from Professor Dunn's thesis. She is more than made up for them by the following tangential but very useful insight. I've always been puzzled by James Madison's apparent changes in philosophy. He was a lower-case federalist prior to 1790, then he founded and led the Anti-Federalist (Republican) Party in the early 1790s through about 1812, and finally he took mildly Federalist positions late in his presidency. Professor Dunn suggests that his apparent changes in philosophy were really changes in what Madison saw as the country's changing needs. Under the Articles of Confederation, the need was for a stronger national government. Once the Constitution was ratified and Hamilton sought to create an even stronger central government, Madison resisted those efforts. Finally, the War of 1812 prompted Madison to mildly strengthen his approach to running the federal government to deal with the war and its aftermath. Well done, Professor Dunn.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. *Brilliant History of the Decline of Virginia from the Seat of the Founders to the Capital of the Rebels* By Stan Prager If you have ever wondered, as I have, what possibly could have happened to the Virginia of the Founders' generation that saw it fall from prominence and then emerge some several decades later hosting the capital of the Confederacy, then I would highly recommend that you read *Dominion of Memories: Jefferson, Madison the Decline of Virginia*, by Susan Dunn.

In a very well-written account of these bookends to Virginia's history, Dunn brilliantly traces the path from Virginia's dominance of the national stage through its slow decline into a provincial backwater mired in bad roads, a regressive state constitution, sub-standard schools and intellectual decay that finds itself clinging to a proud celebration of an imaginary past rooted in an agrarian paradise while shrilly whining about northern industry and growing increasingly paranoiac about the advance of federal power. For anyone who has devoted time to a study of the antebellum south, it should come as no surprise that the centrality of slavery is the chief culprit in Virginia's unravelling, but Dunn's scholarship stands out in her exploration of the complexity and nuance that reveals beyond this a multiplicity of competing forces that seem to doom the "Old Dominion" to its humiliating tumble from eminence. Once upon a time, Virginia and Massachusetts took the lead in forcing a divorce from their colonial mistress and, when independence was achieved, creating the new Republic from a league of states jealous of their own individual sovereignty that almost miraculously was transformed into a nation founded upon both representation and the rule of law. When it came to the forging of a new nation, Virginia truly was a land where giants walked. Three of the six key Founders – Jefferson, Madison and Washington -- were Virginian, as well as a larger cast of prominent fellow citizens: Patrick Henry, George Mason, Richard Henry Lee, Peyton Randolph, and James Monroe. Madison was one of the chief architects of the Constitution. Four of the first five Presidents hailed from the Old Dominion, as well as the highly consequential Chief Justice John Marshall who by defining judicial review essentially carved out the critical role of the Supreme Court as arbiter of constitutional law that it has played ever since. Could anyone have guessed that after James Monroe ended his second term as President in 1825 Virginia would essentially abdicate its central role in the nation? What could possibly have occurred to transform the Virginia of these larger-than-life figures that championed liberty to one some thirty-six years later that would take it out of the Union on a perilous course of secession to preserve and protect not liberty but the institution of slavery? It turns out that the seeds of its decline were present at the creation. While Thomas Jefferson took the critical lead to turn Enlightenment Thought into statute – abolishing medieval anachronisms like entail and primogeniture that perpetuated hereditary wealth in the hands of a few, and passing truly progressive legislation that disestablished a state church and promoted freedom of religion – he and his spiritual kin were less successful with drafting a state constitution that was even close to democratic. As Dunn details, the Virginia state constitution that supplanted the colonial charter was cruelly regressive; long after other states had abandoned such requirements, the Old Dominion extended suffrage to only a very narrow band of property holders, so that most residents had literally no say in their government. Moreover, law was clearly tilted to favor not only the rich slave-owning plantation elite, but by virtue of that construction it placed virtually all authority in the Tidewater planters of the eastern portion of the state. As such, not only were less affluent whites excluded, essentially the entire western half of the state was disenfranchised. If you have ever wondered why the western geography of Virginia seceded from the state in the early days of the Confederacy and then joined the Union, the roots of it are right here. Yet, it was not simply the state constitution, but the fact that it empowered that Tidewater elite to ensure that tax laws favored them, that it resisted and forestalled any improvements to education or transportation or anything that might benefit anyone but their interests. And what were their interests? Basically, self-preservation and an almost bizarre fantasy of an idealized way of life that in fact never really existed except in their collective historical imagination. On the one hand, the rich slave-owning planter aristocracy saw no need to fund roads, canals or railroads to connect the more industrious western part of the state with the Tidewater, or to the predatory markets of the northern states they decried, even as their land lost value, their population hemorrhaged into fleeing emigrants, their schools succumbed to provincialism, their intellectual strength radically contracted as their book and journal publishing diminished. Both Jefferson and Madison decried the state constitution and ever hoped it would be rewritten as more democratic. It was a long time coming and Jefferson did not live to see the day, but a new state constitutional convention was convened in 1829. Although eighteenth century icons Madison and Monroe attended – Monroe colorfully still dressed in eighteenth century attire – it was tragically too late: despite his earlier jeremiads against the old regressive constitution, when it got down to the wire Madison caved and sided with the planters of his class so that the new vital organ of state government offered little but ineffectual saccharine reforms and power was retained by the same forces that had held the state back for decades. For those who rightly recognize the centrality of slavery in the coming rebellion but fail to pay proper attention to simmering hostilities over states' rights and tariffs, Dunn properly restores the balance. She wisely underscores that tariffs were likely unfair to agrarian Virginia and the south, and that all fears of an encroaching federal government were not fully unfounded, yet when she deconstructs their concerns it seems clear that much of their hyperbolic rhetoric lacked substance once again because they were acting in defense of a world that really never was. And in the real world, Virginia became simply a place most people did not want to remain in, even for the extended families of the planter elite who had such a romantic attachment to the land, a kind of feudal society ever oddly out of place for the revolutionary generation and beyond. So they left for schools in the north for a time, or they left permanently. Dunn also reminds us that Washington and Marshall – and Madison most of the time – were nationalists who rather than abandoning Virginia sought to further amalgamate her into the federal fabric they had helped to weave at the dawn of the Republic. Yet, in this they were left mostly disappointed. That Madison and Jefferson are cited in the book's subtitle is not a fanciful flourish to sell more copies: these two – in life and

posthumously – are etched deeply into the historical record of Virginia from 1776 to 1861. From the start, there seems as if there were ever two competing political philosophies: the yeoman farmer with his plot of land jealously guarding his own sovereignty and that of his “country” -- Virginia -- free from the encroachments of others; and, the citizen of the Enlightenment that demanded liberty, equality, and democracy for all in a league with others to guarantee these rights as part of a nation that secured them. For those who have read his biographies – especially the magisterial *American Sphinx* by Joseph Ellis – it should come as little surprise that these two rival perspectives could not only be held by one person but sometimes could be held simultaneously by that same person, within the often brilliant intellectual schizophrenia of none other than Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson was a genius beset by contradictions, who championed liberty while excusing slavery, celebrated provincialism while calling for unity, demanded perpetual union while idealizing bloody revolution for each new generation. To this day, Jefferson – like the Bible – can be cited by just about anyone to support just about any cause. Madison, while often Jefferson’s right-hand man, was more circumspect and far more nationalistic. Both men were to leave an indelible stain in the record for those who claimed the right for nullification and secession as they took their respective turns authoring the Kentucky and Virginia resolutions in heated resistance to the hated Alien and Sedition Acts that were creatures of the Adams Administration in the 1790s. Madison, ever loyal to the union he helped forge, was to spend the rest of his life trying to live down his role in this affair. Meanwhile, other prominent Virginians like Washington and Marshall were unwavering Federalists who sought to strengthen that Union by attaching Virginia and the other states more firmly to its purposes. The elephant in the room in Virginia, as in the rest of the antebellum south, was slavery. The very reason why the Jeffersonian vision of the independent yeoman farmer in an agrarian paradise was really so much smoke-and-mirrors was because it was only the wealthy planter elite of Jefferson’s class who could hope to make it work and only with legions of slaves and – most critically – it usually failed for them, as well. Jefferson was in debt and on the verge of ruin most of his life, as were much of his contemporaries. It was simply not a viable economic model, and -- deep down, as their writings reveal -- they knew it! Meanwhile, the despised northern states of free labor zoomed ahead with wealth and industry and canals and trains and factories and booming cities – while even the richest planters had to routinely navigate ruined roads to get from point A to point B, their children were educated in New England colleges, and both their wealth and their numbers declined. Still, they not only stubbornly clung to this lifestyle but celebrated it as much as they resented their brethren in the north and they disrespected their labor. Here, as Dunn points out, Virginia had much in common with the rest of the slave states of the south: the nature of slavery as a cherished institution was that free labor among whites came to be despised. And yet ... from the start Jefferson and the Virginia Founders – slave-owners all – recognized the evils of their peculiar institution and sought to find a way to divest themselves of it. In his first draft of the Declaration, Jefferson termed slavery an “abominable crime,” and later famously framed the conundrum of hating slavery yet owning slaves to an analogy of holding a “wolf by the ears” – afraid of what might follow if you let it go. Like the state constitutional convention, Jefferson did not live to see the state debate ending slavery in its House of Delegates sessions of 1831-32, but his grandson was there along with a host of others decrying slavery and seeking gradual emancipation, albeit through colonization to Africa for all blacks, free and enslaved, to avoid a mixing of the races. Still, this was a historic moment for Virginia even more potentially consequential than the failed constitutional reforms of two years before. It is difficult to imagine how a Virginia without slaves could have later served as the seat of the Confederacy. Again, there was mighty rhetoric and high hopes. Again, all of it was dashed as the delegates ultimately chose to do nothing. As it was, it was a turning point of sorts, but of the wrong kind. As Dunn notes: “Indeed, the slavery debate had legitimized pro-slavery arguments, making it socially, intellectually, and morally acceptable to condone, defend, and even extol slavery.” Ironically, the tables had turned from the days when the Founders made excuses for participating in a great evil; from now on slavery would be advertised as a virtue. Madison later came to blame it on the abolitionists, presciently foreseeing that talk of abolition “. . . would have the reverse effect and incite southerners to speak out even more passionately in favor of slavery.” Of course, in retrospect, the Virginians – and the rest of the south – can only blame themselves. As a new generation of pseudo-historians on the right have made strong attempts to resurrect the “Lost Cause” Myth of the Confederacy to falsely assert the chief cause of the war as a loyalty to states’ rights rather than the centrality of slavery, Dunn’s book is an especially useful tool for scholars willing to explore peripheral causes without losing sight of the fact that despite various clashes over policy, north and south, had there not been slavery there never could have been a Civil War. Dunn, a professor at Williams College, has written an outstanding book that anyone with an interest in the antebellum years should read, although it should be noted that some background in the subject is requisite in order to make the most out of it. As the last pages are turned, the reflective reader cannot help but sense a certain shadow descending as the tragedy of Richmond burning and Appomattox looms ahead, a dire penumbra clearly anticipated by brilliant minds like Jefferson and Madison who were despite their iconic genius just as clearly incapable of forestalling it.

For decades, the Commonwealth of Virginia led the nation. The premier state in population, size, and wealth, it produced a galaxy of leaders: Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, Mason, Marshall. Four of the first five

presidents were Virginians. And yet by the middle of the nineteenth century, Virginia had become a byword for slavery, provincialism, and poverty. What happened? In her remarkable book, *Dominion of Memories*, historian Susan Dunn reveals the little known story of the decline of the Old Dominion. While the North rapidly industrialized and democratized, Virginia's leaders turned their backs on the accelerating modern world. Spellbound by the myth of aristocratic, gracious plantation life, they waged an impossible battle against progress and time itself. In their last years, two of Virginia's greatest sons, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, grappled vigorously with the Old Dominion's plight. But bound to the traditions of their native soil, they found themselves grievously torn by the competing claims of state and nation, slavery and equality, the agrarian vision and the promises of economic development and prosperity. This fresh and penetrating examination of Virginia's struggle to defend its sovereignty, traditions, and unique identity encapsulates, in the history of a single state, the struggle of an entire nation drifting inexorably toward Civil War.

From Publishers Weekly Whatever happened to the great Commonwealth of Virginia? Dunn (*Jefferson's Second Revolution: The Election Crisis of 1800*) investigates how Virginia fell from being the most advanced and vibrant of the 18th-century American states to being among the new country's most stultified and parochial. Dunn points out that four of the first five American presidents were Virginians, and it was often supposed in the early Republic that, in the words of one politician, the Old Dominion had hatched "a systematic design of perpetually governing the country." By the 1820s, however, the commonwealth's once thriving economy had shuddered to a halt, its aristocratic planters were defaulting on their considerable debts, many lived in poverty and visitors from the industrializing, bustling Northeast noticed that everything was dirty and dilapidated—even Monticello and Mount Vernon. Dunn attributes Virginia's downfall to a combination of its ruling elite adhering to a "gentlemanly" way of life, its obsession with states' rights and the retention of slavery. These factors, Dunn says, fostered an atmosphere of indolence and tedious provincialism that condemned the Old Dominion to the status of a has-been champion musing nostalgically on the pleasures of the past. By focusing intently on the stresses within a single state, Dunn's is an admirable guide to those perplexed by the eventual sundering of the entire Union. (June) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. From Booklist The Virginia of the early 1800s was falling far behind northern states in economic dynamism and political heft. In this provocative exploration, Dunn explains that Old Dominion's elite was aware of its decline, and she delves into their moves toward reform. All failed, but the attempts to revive the state represent a historical alternative to the continuation of slavery and social stagnation. As context to her narration of two arenas where reformists made their case—an 1829 state constitutional convention, and, in the wake of the Nat Turner insurrection of 1831, another convention on emancipation—Dunn explains Virginians' self-conception of their society. Cultured leisure and hospitality were extolled, and the society's foundation in black slavery was defended. She also considers the political views of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison after they left the presidency, which trended away from nationalism, toward states' rights, and resulted in acquiescence in the somnolent status quo. Helping her readers visualize affairs with descriptions of dilapidated ports and worn-out farmland, Dunn renders the antebellum atmosphere with intellectual acuity. Gilbert Taylor Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved. About the Author Susan Dunn is Professor of Humanities at Williams College. She is the author or editor of numerous books, including *Something That Will Surprise the World: The Essential Writings of the Founding Fathers*; and *Jefferson's Second Revolution: The Election Crisis of 1800 and the Triumph of Republicanism*. She lives in Williamstown, Massachusetts.