

Western Virginia shaped America

Jim Glanville

Glanville, of Blacksburg, is a retired chemist who writes and speaks extensively about the history and archaeology of the region.

Much of America's westward expansion funneled through Southwest Virginia. In 1770, the rutted wagon road that traverses our region via what is now the Interstate 81 corridor was the most heavily traveled route in all America.

In the decades following independence, down this Great Southwest Road of Virginia, hundreds of thousands of Virginians moved south and west to newly created states, carrying with them their culture and their political institutions. One writer calls this route of massive internal American emigration "The path of empire in the conquest of The Great West."

It is little known that hundreds of thousands of enslaved Americans traveled down this corridor during those decades. After 1808, when the importation of Negroes from Africa became illegal, Virginia in effect became a breeding place for slaves who were exported to work on the rapidly expanding cotton plantations.

Virginia history is traditionally told from a Tidewater perspective. Virginia Tech historian Peter Wallenstein has written that the telling of that history has been "hijacked too long" by white men from eastern Virginia. He posits that the entire South can perhaps recapture its history by taking a perspective from the mountains west of the Blue Ridge, while simultaneously allowing the plantation country view to reduce to life size.

Another historian who has spoken about the significance of Western Vir-

ginia history is the two-time Pulitzer Prize winner David McCullough. In the introductory video shown at the Visitors Center at the Frontier Culture Museum of Virginia in Staunton, and speaking of the mixing of cultures, he says that while "Jamestown may have been the site of the first European settlement in Virginia, it was here that America took root — here in the Valley of Virginia."

Southwest Virginia was the gateway for one of America's most important internal migrations and the key geographic link in the process of nation-building during the early years of the republic. The region played that role at a time when many doubted a republican form of government could effectively administer such a vast extent of territory.

~~Immediately after the adoption of the Constitution,~~ Virginia, in 1784, led

the way to nation-building by ceding its claims to land west of present day West Virginia (which only came into existence when Virginia split in 1861). In 1791, Vermont became the first new state to join the original 13. The next three states to join the union were all contiguous to Virginia and on its recently ceded land: Kentucky in 1792, Tennessee in 1796 and Ohio in 1802.

During the following decade, states in the deep South joined the union: Louisiana in 1812, Mississippi in 1817 and Alabama in 1819. These states were infused with traditional Virginia attitudes, as so well described by Wilbur J. Cash in his classic 1941 book, "The Mind of the South."

The history of eastern Virginia is perhaps most significant for the history of the state. However, it is the history of Western Virginia that is most significant for the history of America.

Correction: The Virginia Deed of Cession of her western land was accepted by Congress on March 1, 1784. The U.S. Constitution was adopted on September 17, 1787.