

James Branch Cabell the Historian

by Jim Glanville*

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The Richmond-based novelist James Branch Cabell (1879–1958) is arguably the most famous Virginian ever to have lived in Northumberland County. Around 1934, Cabell ceased his annual summer visits to the cabin he had built in 1921 at the Mountain Lake resort near Blacksburg in western Virginia¹ and purchased a summer house at Ophelia on the south bank of the Potomac River estuary. He named it Poynton Lodge (see figure 1).² He and his first wife, Priscilla Bradley Shepherd, continued to use Poynton Lodge until his death twenty-five years later.³ There, in 1941, he completed his historical novel *The First Gentleman of America*.⁴

Although Cabell is probably best known as a novelist, it is the present author's thesis that Cabell (who sometimes published under the truncated name "Branch Cabell") is of more importance for Virginia as a historian than as a novelist. And the article argues that the impetus for him to become a writer of history late in life (in his sixties) grew out of his accidental discovery of the history of Florida and its relationship

to the history of the Northern Neck of Virginia. These discoveries led him first to question—and then strongly challenge—the view of Virginia history with which he had been inculcated as a child in Richmond and, later, as a student at the College of William and Mary. Taking up summer residence in Northumberland County was a significant factor in turning Cabell toward a study of history.

Cabell the Novelist

Cabell wrote more than fifty books, the majority of which are novels of fantasy and mythology that describe happenings in an imaginary realm Cabell called Poictesme. But most critics agree they can be read as disguised commentary about life and society in the place where Cabell was born, raised, and lived all his life—the place he called Richmond-in-Virginia. Some aficionados of fantasy writing regard him as a pioneer of that genre.

The essential facts of Cabell's career as a novelist are these: he attracted the praise of H.

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1. Virginia Finnegan Roberts, *Mountain Lake Remembered* (Austin, Tex.: Eakin Press, 1997).
2. James Branch Cabell, *Ladies and Gentlemen* (New York: McBride and Company, 1934) contains a letter to Richard Butler Glaezner that ends "Ophelia, Virginia June, 1934." Apparently, Cabell purchased Poynton Lodge in anticipation of the expiration of his fifteen-year lease at Mountain Lake. It appears that the Cabells at first rented this house in Northumberland County; the first record of a purchase by them of property in this area was in March 1936. Another possibility is that they had purchased the property in 1934, but the deed was not formalized until 1936. (See *Northumberland County Deed Book NN*, 91–92.)
3. Cabell's second wife, Margaret Freeman, inherited Poynton Lodge in 1958 and continued to use it for many years prior to her death in 1983.
4. James Branch Cabell, *The First Gentleman of America: A Comedy of Conquest* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1942).



Figure 1. Poynton Lodge at Ophelia in Northumberland County (photo by the author, February 2010).

L. Mencken in 1917, became nationally known in the 1920s (in particular for the novel *Jurgen*, which was unsuccessfully prosecuted in New York for obscenity), and was effectively finished as a novelist by 1930.

As one of Virginia's best-known novelists, much has been written about him. Biographies of Cabell include early ones by Davis⁵ and Tarrant,⁶ and a more recent one by MacDonald.⁷ Other printed works about Cabell include an edited collection of centennial essays;⁸ Maurice

Duke's reference guide;⁹ a small, academic magazine published irregularly over three decades;¹⁰ and, quite recently, a slim volume by Michael Swanwick, which is an assessment of Cabell's legacy as a novelist.¹¹

Online sources for Cabell include an article in the *Dictionary of Virginia Biography*¹² and various articles published at the Special Collections website of the James Branch Cabell Library at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond.¹³ Useful Cabell websites created by

5. Joe Lee Davis, *James Branch Cabell* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1962).

6. Desmond Tarrant, *James Branch Cabell: The Dream and the Reality* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967).

7. Edgar E. MacDonald, *James Branch Cabell and Richmond-in-Virginia* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1993).

8. M. Thomas Inge and Edgar E. MacDonald, eds., *James Branch Cabell: Centennial Essays* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983).

9. Maurice Duke, *James Branch Cabell: A Reference Guide* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1979).

10. Paul Spencer, ed., *Kalki: Studies in James Branch Cabell* (Commerce, Tex.: James Branch Cabell Society, published irregularly 1965–93).

11. Michael Swanwick, *What Can Be Saved From the Wreckage?* (Upper Montclair, N.J.: Temporary Culture, 2007).

12. Stephen R. Wetta, "James Branch Cabell, 14 April 1879–5 May 1958," in *Dictionary of Virginia Biography*, vol. 2 (Richmond: Library of Virginia, 2002), 482–84; also online at http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Cabell_James_Branch_1879-1958, January 2011 (accessed August 20, 2011).

13. "James Branch Cabell, 1879–1958," updated February 22, 2010, at <http://www.library.vcu.edu/jbc/speccoll/exhibit/cabell/jbclife.html> (and links therein); and "A Short Biography of James Branch Cabell," updated February 22, 2010, at <http://www.library.vcu.edu/jbc/speccoll/exhibit/cabell/jbcbio.html> (and links therein). Both accessed August 20, 2011.

individuals are those of David Langford¹⁴ and Mike Keith.¹⁵

Quotations from various critics show Cabell's current standing as a novelist and literary figure:

[The work of James Branch Cabell] . . . is falling into deserved neglect.¹⁶

[Cabell is] a writer now possessed of no popular reputation and only minor scholarly renown, who lived in a community where he received very little recognition or readership during his lifetime and is scarcely remembered today outside the walls of the library bearing his name on the campus of a downtown university.¹⁷

But a far more humiliating fate [than the indictment of *Jurgen* for obscenity] would eventually befall [Cabell's] other books: 35 years after his death, they are either out of print or available only as scholarly reprints, and their author is no longer taught, discussed or remembered, save by specialists in Southern literature.¹⁸

Today Cabell's star has fallen very far indeed. . . . Cabell may win the award for the most obscure writer (today) who at one time was hugely famous.¹⁹

While some of Cabell's novels—especially those that are science fiction and fantasy—have achieved cult status, his work

fell out of favor beginning in the 1930s. By the time of his death in 1958, he was known primarily as the author of the scandalous *Jurgen*.²⁰

There are, alas, an infinite number of ways for a writer to destroy himself. James Branch Cabell chose one of the more interesting. Standing at the helm of the single most successful literary career of any fantasist of the twentieth century, he drove the great ship of his reputation straight and unerringly onto the rocks. . . . This remarkable feat of self-obliteration was accomplished through diligence, hard work, and a perverse brilliance of timing on Cabell's part.²¹

Maurice Duke recently offered a scholarly assessment of Cabell:

I see him in the context of English and American writers of the twentieth century, people such as Eliot, Pound, Joyce, Faulkner and the like. I see him also as deeply informed by his Southern heritage and at the same time markedly estranged from it. . . . I think it's fair to say that we Southerners are a somewhat schizophrenic lot. Our collective world-view is formed by our past at the same time we are repelled by it. This, I think, is the source of Cabell's ironic vision, and quite likely the source of . . . his revisionist view of Virginia history.²²

14. David Rowland Langford, "James Branch Cabell: 14 April 1879–5 May 1958." (Written in 2004 for a planned volume of the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* that was never issued. Published in 2007 online at <http://www.ansible.co.uk/writing/dlb-cabell.html> [accessed August 20, 2011].)

15. Mike Keith, *James Branch Cabell: Overview and Personal Notes*, online at <http://www.cadaeic.net/cabell.html> (accessed August 20, 2011).

16. Jonathan Yardley, *Chicago Tribune*, February 29, 1976.

17. Louis D. Rubin Jr. in Inge and MacDonald, *Centennial Essays*, 3.

18. Terry Teachout, "'The Wrong Kind of Southerner': A Review of *James Branch Cabell and Richmond-in-Virginia* by Edgar MacDonald," *New York Times*, July 25, 1993.

19. Keith, *James Branch Cabell*.

20. Wetta, "James Branch Cabell."

21. Swanwick, *What Can Be Saved From the Wreckage?*, 1.

22. Maurice Duke in an e-mail to the author, July 26, 2011. Also see Maurice Duke, "James Branch Cabell: A Neglected Son of the Northern Neck," in Carolyn H. Jett, ed., *Echoes of Yesteryear, Occasional Papers*, vol. 1 (Mary Ball Washington Museum and Library, 2006): 53–58. In that article, Duke tells how he came to be the cataloger of Cabell's legacy library, and of sitting at Cabell's desk at Poynton Lodge reading Cabell's books.



Figure 2a. Conjectural sketch of the deaths of Father Luis Quirós and two of the Catholic brothers on February 4, 1571 (Michael Kenny, *The Romance of the Floridas*, 1934, 277).

Spanish Florida, Virginia, and the American Indian Paquiquineo (Baptized as Don Luis de Velasco)

To understand the significance of Cabell as a historian requires knowing something of the early history of Florida.

Today, we customarily think of Florida as the modern U.S. state. However, to sixteenth-century Spaniards, Florida was roughly the entire southeast quadrant of North America—Virginia was Florida before it was Virginia. As Cabell himself pointed out, the establishment in 1565 of the first European settlement in North America at San Augustin (St. Augustine) preceded by four decades the first English settlement at Jamestown.²³

In the late summer of 1570, a party of Jesuit missionaries left St. Augustine heading north for the Bahía Santa Maria (Chesapeake Bay).

Accompanying the Catholic priests, brothers, and scholastics was an American Indian who had left the Chesapeake Bay region about ten years earlier on a Spanish vessel from a place called Ajacán, and had spent the intervening years in Spain, Cuba, and Mexico. Now, this Indian—known to the Spanish by his baptismal name of Don Luis de Velasco—was returning home as a guide and interpreter for the missionaries. Six months later, in February 1571, all of the Catholics were killed (see figures 2a and 2b). The *Encyclopedia Virginia* provides a summary biography of Don Luis.²⁴

The 1571 slaughter of the Catholics in the Chesapeake area was long minimized in orthodox Virginia history, although it has always remained much alive in the minds of Catholic writers and Catholic Virginians,²⁵ because of the status of the slain as martyrs for their faith



Figure 2b. Conjectural sketch of the death of Father Baptista Segura and four of the Catholic brothers on February 9, 1571 (Michael Kenny, *The Romance of the Floridas*, 1934, 280).

23. Eugene Lyon, *The Enterprise of Florida: Pedro Menéndez de Avilés and the Spanish Conquest of 1565–1568* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1983 [1976]), offers a detailed view of Florida's settlement; Paul E. Hoffman, *Florida's Frontiers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002) offers a broad one.
24. Helen C. Roundtree, "Don Luís de Velasco/Paquiquineo (fl. 1561–1571)," in E. Brendan Wolfe, ed., *Encyclopedia Virginia*, at http://www.EncyclopediaVirginia.org/Don_LuA (accessed August 25, 2011). Note that in the article's title, "fl." means "flourished," and is used when birth and death dates are unknown.
25. See, for example, John Gilmary Shea, *History of the Catholic Missions Among the Indian Tribes of the United States: 1529–1854* (New York: Edward Dunigan & Bro., 1855); Shea, *A History of the Catholic Church Within the Limits of the United States: From the First Attempted Colonization to the Present Time* (New York: John G. Shea, 1886); and Shea, "The Log Chapel on the Rappahannock," *Catholic World* 20 (1875): 847–56. Shea has been dubbed "The Father of American Catholic history."

Also see E. I. Devitt, SJ, "Axacan. The Martyrs of the Rappahannock," *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia* 19 (1908): 1–17; and Michael Kenny, SJ, *The Romance of the Floridas: The Finding and the Founding* (New York: Bruce Publishing Co., 1934). A copy of the latter book was in Cabell's personal library and is now in the Cabell Room of the library at Virginia Commonwealth University.

and potential candidates for beatification.²⁶

Cabell's writings show that he knew the works of the Catholic writers, as well as the book by Woodbury Lowery, which contains a lengthy account of Don Luis.²⁷ Cabell was also strongly influenced by the popular history book written by A. Hyatt Verrill, which anticipates Cabell's labeling of Don Luis as the man who saved Virginia from the Spanish for the English.²⁸ (This author had not read Verrill's book when, in 2004, he attributed this "saving of Virginia for the English" idea exclusively to Cabell.)²⁹

The most comprehensive account of the 1571 killings was published in 1953 by the Jesuit priests Clifford Lewis and Albert Loomie,³⁰ although their account, with its many translations of Spanish archival documents, was published too late to have any influence on Cabell. This book continues to be essential to academic studies of Don Luis, and is repeatedly and widely cited. However, it badly needs to be reexamined in the light of modern scholarship.

At the time of its publication, this book was strongly criticized by the Spanish period historian Charles J. Bishko, who, although an admitted nonexpert on Virginia's Indian history, was an expert on sixteenth-century Spanish documents and their translation and interpretation. Bishko wrote:

The English translation, inconve-

niently placed after each document instead of facing it on opposite pages, is readable enough but only roughly accurate and must be used with caution. It often exhibits excessive freedom in paraphrasing rather than closely following the Castilian or Latin (which the translator does not always understand); and numerous omissions or misinterpretations of words or phrases result in making obscure, ambiguous, or flat wrong in English what is perfectly clear in the original. . . . By reason . . . of its controversial geographical claims and certain intrinsic weaknesses of treatment, it cannot be reckoned as in any sense a definitive study.³¹

Those "geographical claims" of Lewis and Loomie placed the traditional site of the Spanish Chesapeake mission on the York River. The site of the mission remains a matter of debate, although unpublished work makes a strong case that it was on Diascund Creek, just above its mouth at the Chickahominy River.³² Cabell, possibly heavily influenced by his summering on the Northern Neck, had placed the mission near the village of Sharps on the Rappahannock River, in Richmond County.³³

A breakthrough came in 1983, when the historian Paul Hoffman (another specialist in the translation and interpretation of Spanish

26. About ten years ago a formal beginning of the beatification process for these missionaries was made by the Catholic church (Matthew M. Anger, "Spanish Martyrs for Virginia," *Seattle Catholic*, August 30, 2003). See also James Kubicki, SJ, "Martyrs of Virginia—Reflection for 2/9/11," online video at <http://es.gloria.tv/?media=129384> (accessed August 29, 2011). The beatification process is presently dormant (Russell Smith, SJ, telephone conversation with the author, January 11, 2010).

27. Woodbury Lowery, *The Spanish Settlements Within the Present Limits of the United States, 1513–1561* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1911).

28. A. Hyatt Verrill, *Romantic and Historic Virginia* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1935). Chapter 1, pp. 1–15, is titled "A Forgotten Chapter of History," and tells the Don Luis story.

29. Jim Glanville, "Virginia Before Pocahontas," *Washington Post*, April 19, 2005, A18. Online at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A64610-2005Apr18.html> (accessed August 22, 2011).

30. Clifford Merle Lewis, SJ, and Albert J. Loomie, SJ, *The Spanish Jesuit Mission in Virginia 1570–1572* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, for the Virginia Historical Society, 1953). William M. E. Rachal wrote an appreciation of these authors at the time of publication of their book, in "A Spanish Mission in Virginia," *Commonwealth* 20 (1953): 22.

31. Charles J. Bishko, "A Review of *The Spanish Jesuit Mission in Virginia, 1570–1572* by Clifford M. Lewis; Albert J. Loomie," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 62(2) (1954): 214–17.

32. William Case (Billy) Plumb, "Defining the Site of the 1570–71 Spanish Jesuit Mission in Virginia," unpublished manuscript, July 2002 (copy in author's files).

33. James Branch Cabell, editorial note, in *First Gentleman of America*, 287.

archival documents) found new documentary evidence in the Spanish archives that revealed that the Indian traditionally called by his Spanish name, Don Luis de Velasco, had the Algonquian Indian name of Paquiquineo.³⁴ Most subsequent writers (and there have been many) have adopted this American Indian name for him. Cabell designated Paquiquineo as both "The First Gentleman of America" (the title of his 1942 book) and "The First Virginian" (the title of a later essay).

Cabell knew the basic story of Paquiquineo and of the Jesuit slaughter for twenty-five years before fitting the pieces together for himself and becoming galvanized and transformed by Paquiquineo's tale. We know this from Cabell himself. He wrote:³⁵

The story of the American born Don Luis de Velasco had lurked to the back of my mind, as a not impossible theme for romance to develop, since 1912, or about then, when I first ran across Shea's account of Don Luis in *The Indian Miscellany*—a great many years before I knew anything at all about the local mythology of the Northern Neck of Virginia.³⁶

Cabell's copy of *The Indian Miscellany* today is in the Special Collections at his eponymous library at Virginia Commonwealth University, and is inscribed in Cabell's hand: "It

was this volume which circa 1912 / gave me the notion of writing / some day or another, the book which in 1939 began to take form as *The First Gentleman of America* / James Branch Cabell."³⁷

James Branch Cabell's Evolution as a Historian

As a child, Cabell's exposure to history was begun by his overhearing adults who talked much about the Civil War and the Lost Cause. He vividly described that exposure fifty years later in his essay "Almost Touching the Confederacy."³⁸

Growing older, he attended four different private schools in Richmond—concluding his studies at the one headed by John Peyton McGuire.³⁹ McGuire was a preservationist who took a strong Virginia-first-and-only view of Virginia history and who served on the advisory board of the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (APVA) from 1896 to 1901.⁴⁰

During the years 1895–1898, Cabell attended the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg. His college years exposed him almost exclusively to a preservationist view of Virginia history. For some time he was a lodger in the home of Cynthia Beverly Tucker Coleman, a woman with a "forceful personality," a passionate genealogist, and a founder in 1889 of the APVA.⁴¹

34. Paul E. Hoffman, *A New Andalusia and a Way to the Orient: The American Southeast During the Sixteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), reissued in 2004 with a new introduction by the author.
35. Cabell, editorial note, *First Gentleman of America*, 281–302.
36. Cabell's reference here to "Shea's account" is to John Gilmary Shea, "The Spanish Mission Colony on the Rappahannock: The First European Settlement in Virginia," in William Wallace Beach, ed., *The Indian Miscellany* (Albany, N.Y.: J. Munsell, 1877), 333–43.
37. Maurice Duke, "James Branch Cabell's Personal Library," *Studies in Bibliography* 23 (1970): 207–16.
38. James Branch Cabell, "Almost Touching the Confederacy," *Atlantic Monthly*, October 1946. Reprinted in James Branch Cabell, *Let Me Lie: Being in the Main an Ethnological Account of the Commonwealth of Virginia and the Making of Its History* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Company, 1947; reprinted 2001, with an introduction by R. H. W. Dillard [Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia]), 25–42.
39. MacDonald, *James Branch Cabell and Richmond-in-Virginia*, 21–22 and 40.
40. James M. Lindgren, *Preserving the Old Dominion: Preservation and Virginia Traditionalism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993), 222 and 253. The APVA is now called Preservation Virginia.
41. James M. Lindgren, "'Whatever is Un-Virginian is Wrong': The APVA's Sense of the Old Dominion," *Virginia Cavalcade* 38 (1989): 112–23. Page 113 of this essay shows a photograph of Cynthia Coleman in the parlor of Williamsburg's Tayloe House before its restoration. As her lodger, Cabell must have been intimately familiar with this room.

One of Cabell's favorite professors was John Lesslie Hall, a teacher of English history and literature who was a frequent speaker on behalf of the APVA, particularly at Jamestown events. The tangible goals of the APVA were to preserve and restore the historic Jamestown site, just south of Williamsburg, and repair the desolation and neglect that had settled on Williamsburg in the decades after the Civil War; its intangible goal was to promote the slogan "Whatever is Un-Virginian Is Wrong."⁴² Cabell's major biographer posits that the events of his college period would ". . . induce a child of commercial Richmond into posing as an aristocratic Virginian."⁴³

Cabell resigned from William and Mary under unclear circumstances, very near the end of his program of study, and only returned there to graduate after the intervention of a lawyer friend of his family. This period of his life assuredly left a deep mark on Cabell. It is argued here that his exposure to Virginia history during his childhood and student years constituted an indoctrination into a distorted and propagandistic view against which he finally and emphatically reacted four decades later in Florida and Northumberland County.

After three years as a small-time newspaper reporter in Richmond and New York City,⁴⁴ Cabell achieved modest success publishing magazine stories and his early novels in the years 1902–1910. During this period, Cabell wrote three extended works of genealogy—not literally writing history but giving him experience in historical writing: *Branchiana* (1907), *Branch of Abingdon* (1911), and *The Majors and their Marriages* (1915).

Cabell and his wife (he married first in 1913) were both active in Virginia's patriotic societies. He served as genealogist for the Sons of the American Revolution, was a member of the First Families of Virginia and the Society of the Cincinnati, was a historian for the Society of Colonial Wars in the State of Virginia, and served

as an editor for the Virginia War History Commission.⁴⁵ His wife was an enthusiastic participant in the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution (NSDAR) and similar organizations. Although Cabell clearly had a continuing interest in history, the decade from 1917 to 1927 was his time of novelistic triumph, and Virginia history was by no means the focus of his writing.

During the years 1927–1930, Cabell was obsessed with preparing the *Storisende* octadecologue, an eighteen-volume rewrite of most of his previous novels. It was the project that caused Michael Swanwick to title his 2007 book about Cabell *What Can Be Salvaged from the Wreckage?* But by 1934, when Cabell published a history-related set of essays titled *Ladies and Gentlemen* (which took the form of letters to dead luminaries), his career as a novelist was effectively over.

At about that time, he bought Poynton Lodge in Northumberland County and he discovered Florida. These events changed the path of his writing life.

Ordered by his physician to travel to a warmer clime to combat pneumonia, Cabell relates that when he first arrived in Florida in January 1935, he was a very sick man. Propped up on seven pillows, he was driven through St. Augustine to an unnamed town, no doubt along the seafront route A1A, which he found to be "flaunting, cheapjack, and atrocious." There he asked to be returned to the "old-looking place," which turned out to be St. Augustine.⁴⁶ Thus did Cabell's annual series of winter visits to Florida begin, and with them his enchantment with Florida history.

On their return to Virginia, in April 1935, Cabell's wife, Priscilla Bradley Shepherd, in her capacity as honorary regent of the Virginia chapter of the National Daughters of the American Colonists, unveiled a memorial at Cape Henry that included a granite cross in memory of the wooden cross erected by the English colonists in

42. Lindgren, *Preserving the Old Dominion*, 42 ff.

43. MacDonald, *James Branch Cabell and Richmond-in-Virginia*, 55.

44. Sam Riley, "The Journalistic Apprenticeship of James Branch Cabell, Virginia Literary Great," *Virginia Cavalcade* 51(2): 76–83.

45. "James Branch Cabell" at www.encyclopediavirginia.org (accessed August 20, 2011).

46. James Branch Cabell, "About the Book's Background," in his book *The Devil's Own Dear Son, a Comedy of the Fatted Calf* (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1949), xi–xxvii.

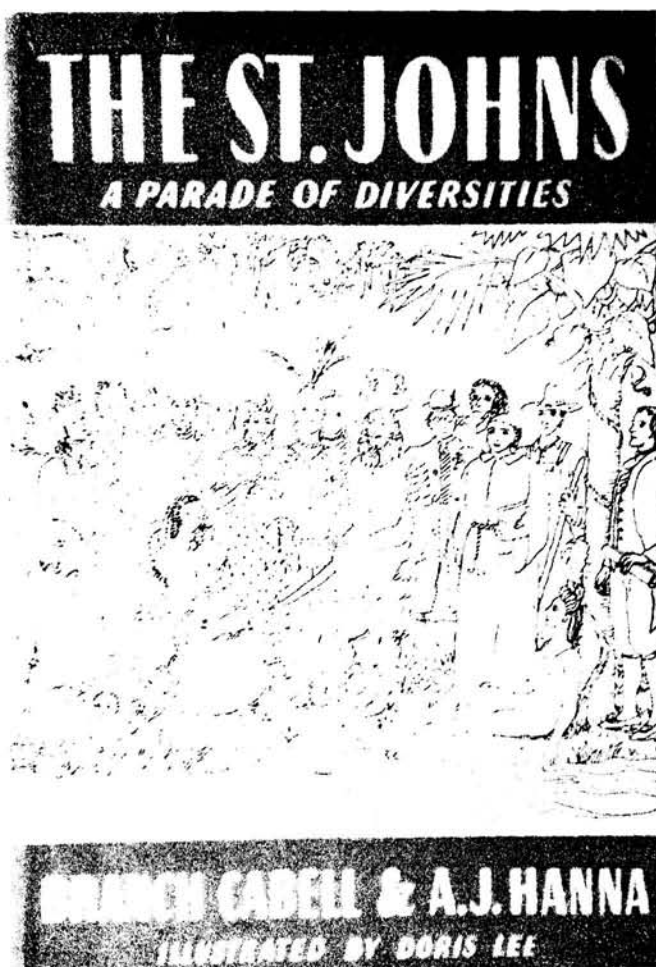


Figure 3. The front of the dust jacket of the 1943 nonfiction history book that James Branch Cabell (writing as Branch Cabell) coauthored with Rollins College history professor Alfred J. Hanna.

1607.⁴⁷ Many years later, Cabell remarked, "... the woman believed it was this cross that justified her existence upon the earth."⁴⁸

In 1936, at the age of fifty-seven, Cabell's serious education as a historian began. In St. Augustine, over the next several years, he made the acquaintance of Rollins College history professor Alfred J. Hanna, and Florida State University history professor Kathryn Trimmer Ab-

bey (the two were to marry a few years later). Hanna loaned Cabell many history books with "great-hearted prodigality" and invited him to speak at Rollins College. Cabell also became acquainted with Florida Historical Society leaders Watt Marchman and Mr. and Mrs. Edward W. Lawson. Now, for the first time, Cabell struck out on his own historical investigations and remarkably discovered the long misplaced empty coffin of Pedro Menéndez de Avilés (the key founder of Spanish Florida) in a storage room at the St. Augustine city hall. He then led the effort to have the casket transferred from city ownership to the Catholic church, and its eventual relocation to the "beautiful Chapel of Nuestra Señora de La Lèche."⁴⁹

In 1939, Cabell began writing his historical novel *The First Gentleman of America*, which would be published in 1942. About this book, Cabell wrote:

Nor even when, at a rather deferred long last, I set about the actual writing of this story, in the autumn of 1939, was my knowledge as to Pedro Menéndez more than a tattered and chance-woven, small rag of hearsay, despite the five winters I had spent in St. Augustine. It was a deficiency which had to be remedied.⁵⁰

While the writing of *The First Gentleman* was underway, Cabell established a close literary friendship in St. Augustine with the prominent author and publisher Stephen Vincent Benét. Benét suggested that Cabell coauthor a book about the history of the St. Johns River with Professor A. J. Hanna. This collaboration resulted in the publication in 1943 of Cabell's first work of history (figure 3).⁵¹ The story of the Cabell-Hanna collaboration has been told in considerable detail (using their extensive, archived correspondence) by a Rollins College history professor.⁵²

47. Cape Henry Memorial, U.S. National Park Service, at www.nps.gov/came (accessed August 24, 2011).

48. James Branch Cabell, *As I Remember It: Some Epilogues in Recollection* (New York: McBride, 1955), 51.

49. Cabell, editorial note, *First Gentleman of America*, 296–97.

50. Cabell, editorial note, *First Gentleman of America*, 291–92.

51. James Branch Cabell and A. J. Hanna, *The St. Johns: A Parade of Diversities* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1943).

52. Jack C. Lane, "Constructing 'The St. Johns': History as Literary Narrative," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 80 (2002): 312–31.

The First Gentleman of America and the Northern Neck

Cabell's historical novel, *The First Gentleman of America*, begins thus:

IT IS A TALE told in the Northern Neck of Virginia, between the Potomac River and the Rappahannock River; and the teller of it says it is the same story he got from his grandfather, who got it from his own grandfather, and so on back to that instant when English ears first heard this same story, about the doings of Nemattanon [Cabell's name for Paquiquineo—see below], not very long after forthright Anglo-Saxons came into this part of Virginia, to bring with them double-dealing and firearms and alcohol and yet other amenities which aid the civilized in dealing with the owners of a backward country such as one might plunder with profit. But it was an old story even then; for it concerns a people who had lived in the Northern Neck of Virginia, reasonably and simply, for an unrecorded while, before the English overran all that great and fertile peninsula with the superior simplicity and the destructiveness of a race of reformers. These people used to call their country Ajacan. Their country extended from about the present station of Stratford Hall along the south bank of the Potomac, and from about Leedstown along the north bank of the Rappahannock, even unto Reedville and Whitestone, where nowadays these thriving centres of the fertilizer industry affront Chesapeake Bay with stench of rotting fish and of fish oil.⁵³

This excerpt reveals Cabell's distinctive style to a reader who may be unfamiliar with it. *First Gentleman* combines South American Indian mythology with historically real figures from Florida history, and invents an Indian

culture on the Northern Neck to tell the tale of Paquiquineo. The book very much reflects Cabell's places of interest—St. Augustine is prominent, along with Burgess Store in Northumberland County—and the book makes much more sense if one is familiar with Cabell's private world.

Edward Wagenknecht wrote of this book:

[Cabell] has combined all known mythologies and invented his own; unless you have a specialist's knowledge of the field, you will never know how much is scholarship and how much invention; neither can you be sure whether a queer looking name is an anagram which you must solve to get the point of the episode in which it figures—whether, indeed, the whole episode has a profound inner meaning, or whether the surface beauty (or, as the case may be, the surface hilarity) is supposed to be enough.⁵⁴

Just so. Though the narrative of the novel need not concern us here, it is worth mentioning that Cabell ingeniously—but fictionally—manages through a series of sleight-of-hand literary and geographic maneuvers to make Paquiquineo the father of John Smith of Jamestown.⁵⁵

Noteworthy in that excerpt is Cabell's description of the early English settlers on the Northern Neck: not in the traditional Virginia manner, as noble immigrants bringing democracy and civilization, but rather as exploitative invaders.

Of considerably more interest than the novel itself, for a study of Cabell the historian, are its appurtenances: the dedication, bibliography, and editorial note. The dedication to A. J. Hanna takes the form of an acrostic (a device that Cabell often used) on "AJHANNA," the first three lines (AJH) read: "As, but for you, this book had not been done / Justly, I need (at outset) to proclaim / How opulent has been your

53. Cabell, *First Gentleman of America*, 3.

54. Edward Wagenknecht, "Cabell: A Reconsideration," *College English* 9 (1948): 238–46. In Cabell's *First Gentleman of America*, 8, the "Charm of Belshaddar" protects the natives of Ajacan. Belshaddar is an anagram of balderdash. Cabell aficionado Mike Keith (see footnotes 15 and 19) a former "anagrammist of the year" and a student of Cabell's many anagrams, says this anagram has never before been reported (e-mail message to the author, September 7, 2011).

55. Cabell, *First Gentleman of America*, 166–67.

aid." Here, Cabell is graciously acknowledging his apprenticeship as an amateur historian to the professional, Hanna.

Cabell's bibliography runs to sixty-six entries covering five pages. Amusingly, Cabell was praised for his creative ingenuity in cleverly generating historians. Five years after the publication of *First Gentleman*, he wrote that "my bibliography was dismissed with a shrug as mere harmless fooling . . . as a fair sample of my ingenuity in inventing historians."⁵⁶ None was invented, and he claimed in a letter to the *Saturday Review of Literature* that "I needs confess to my unblushing theft, from veracity, of the entire story."⁵⁷ Indeed, this writer has personally verified every entry in the bibliography. However, although the bibliography is legitimate, most of the novel itself is pure fiction, though based on historically real figures with some nod given to actual historical events.

The editorial note,⁵⁸ which is signed "Poynton Lodge, June 1941," is a significant document of serious history that as far as I know has never been taken seriously, for obvious reasons: its obscurity and its flippancy. Its obscurity is self-evident whereas its flippancy principally consists of Cabell's insistence that the tale of Paquiquineo's dispatch of the Jesuits was widely known oral history on the Northern Neck.

In the editorial note, Cabell lists the names of many Northern Neckers with whom he claimed to have discussed that oral history. From the very beginning of this study his claim seemed unbelievable: the memory of Paquiquineo slaying the Jesuits would have to have endured across almost four centuries and, never having been written down, would clearly not have been common knowledge in 1940.

Recently, in a small exercise of experimental history, the author tested whether Cabell's alleged informants were real or fictional by running an advertisement in the *Rappahannock Record* (figure 4). This advertisement brought but a single response, a telephone call from a woman who was raised in Ophelia and today

lives in Lancaster County. She found all the names plausible but did not know of any real person whose name matched any of those listed in the ad.

The author's conclusion that these mostly Northumberland residents (twelve of the fourteen whom Cabell lists) were fictitious has been reinforced by a little research by the editor of this journal, who examined the 1930 census in search of Cabell's alleged informants. He reported that of the fourteen names, he "could not find a good match (with only two . . . seeming to be possibilities), and that for eight of the names there was absolutely no approximate match living anywhere near the Northern Neck in 1930."⁵⁹ It seems that although Cabell did not invent historians, he invented Northern Neck-

Historian seeking information about the following persons, said to have been living in 1941:

Professor Augustine Cockrell of Coan Hall Academy; Miss Susan Cockrell of Ophelia; Captain Edmund Crabbe of Heathsville; Rev. Dr. J. Jett Eskridge of the Avalon Independent Presbyterian Church; Mrs. Adeline Ball Gaskins of Wicomico Wharf; Captain Gilbert Gaskins of Callao; Francis X. Goldberg of Horse Head; Judge Alpheus L. Haynie of Farnham; Dr. Howard Haynie of Glebe Point; Captain Richard Hull Haynie, Sr., of Burgess Store; Captain Omohundro Haynie of Fleeton; Miss Hope Hudnall of Morattico Manor; Captain Henry Hull Jett of Sunnybank; and Father Ignatius L. McDonnell, S.J., Ph.D., D.D., of Lewisetta and Totuskey.

If you knew any of these individuals, knew people who did, or know anything about any of them, please send information to Professor Jim Glanville at jglanvil@vt.edu or call 540-953-1866.

Figure 4. An advertisement run by the author in the *Rappahannock Record*, July 7, 2011.

56. James Branch Cabell, "The First Virginian," in *Let Me Lie*, 25–42.

57. James Branch Cabell, "Factual Fiction," letter to the editor, *Saturday Review of Literature*, April 11, 1942, 15.

58. Cabell, *First Gentleman of America*, 281–302.

59. E-mail message from Thomas Wolf to the author, July 21, 2011. Moreover, Cabell identified two of his fourteen informants as Adeline Ball Gaskins and Capt. Gilbert Gaskins. On February 26, 2010, the author spoke by telephone with Thomas Elliot Gaskins, age ninety-one, who was born in Northumberland

ers with abandon.⁶⁰ The seriousness of the editorial note rests mainly in Cabell's discussion of Paquiquineo, whom Cabell calls "Nemattanow" in the editorial note and throughout the novel.

It is unclear why Cabell calls him Nemattanow. In traditional Virginia history, the Indian Jack-of-the-Feathers first appears under the name of Manetute in the 1612 "True Relation" of Virginia by George Percy.⁶¹ This Jack-of-the-Feathers was apparently an Indian leader who fought the English adorned with many feathers and earned the reputation of being immune to English bullets. Cabell, in his editorial note, says,

Captain John Smith relates that the English nicknamed this vagabond "Jack of the Feather," because he commonly went about adorned with a feather; and that old Jack, "for his courage and policy, was accounted amongst the Salvages their chiefe Capitaine, and immortall from any hurt could be done him." Smith adds that the Indians called the vainglorious stranger "Nemattanow."

Cabell's reference here is to Smith's 1624 *Generall Historie of Virginia*,⁶² an edition of which Cabell owned.

It would be instructive to know why Cabell changed "Nemattanow" to "Nemattanon." Nemattanon does anagram to "A Ten Ton Man," but that's surely just a humorous accident. The many variant spellings of Nemattanow from the time of early Virginia English settlement have been discussed by Fausz and Kukla,⁶³ but their careful work sheds no light on why Cabell chose

Nemattanon. Sometimes Cabell simply remains inscrutable.

Here's what Cabell wrote in his editorial note that is so significant:

[N]ear fifty years after the [slaughter of the Jesuits] . . . a very old man came out of the west, into the early established Colony of Virginia, saying all his people were dead. Captain John Smith relates that the English nicknamed this vagabond "Jack of the Feather," . . . This Jack of the Feather (Smith continues) was the main cause of the Great Massacre of 1622, in which almost but, through mischance, not quite all the English were killed. . . . I [Cabell] would very much like, in the cause of irony, to declare that this was indeed the ending . . . of my protagonist, the first gentleman of America, the grandee of Spain, the son and grandson of pagan deities; yet nobody can be certain. . . . All in all, I elect to assert nothing as to this time-obscured "Jack of the Feather." I introduce him as a sardonic possibility.

By raising the possibility that Paquiquineo many years later returned to combat the Jamestown settlers, Cabell is the one true founder of what will be here designated the "Paquiquineo-Resurrected" school of history. It is the principal theory of this school that Paquiquineo (Don Luis), or possibly a servant of his, reappears decades after the slaughter of the Spanish missionaries, in order to try to drive the English from early Jamestown. This author is well aware that this sounds fanci-

County (across the water from Cockrell's Marine Railway), in a house that he owns even today. Thomas Gaskins told the author that he had never heard of either of Cabell's informants, and that Cabell always seemed to be lost in thought on the occasions he met him.

60. Before writing this editorial note, Cabell had been summering for four or five years at Ophelia in Northumberland County—plenty of time for him to become familiar with the places on the Neck and many of the typical names of its inhabitants. That Cabell would compose a plausible list of informants is thus unsurprising, especially as he was a professional writer of high creativity.
61. George Percy, "A Trewe Relacyon: Virginia from 1609 to 1612," *Tyler's Quarterly Historical and Genealogical Magazine* 3 (1922): 259–81.
62. John Smith, *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles with the Names of the Adventurers, Planters, and Governours from their first beginning An: 1584 to this present 1624* (London: Michael Sparkes, 1624. Facsimile edition. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1966).
63. J. Frederick Fausz and Jon Kukla, "A Letter [from George Wyatt of Maidstone, Kent, to his son Sir Francis Wyatt] of Advice to the Governor of Virginia, 1624," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 34 (1977): 104–29.

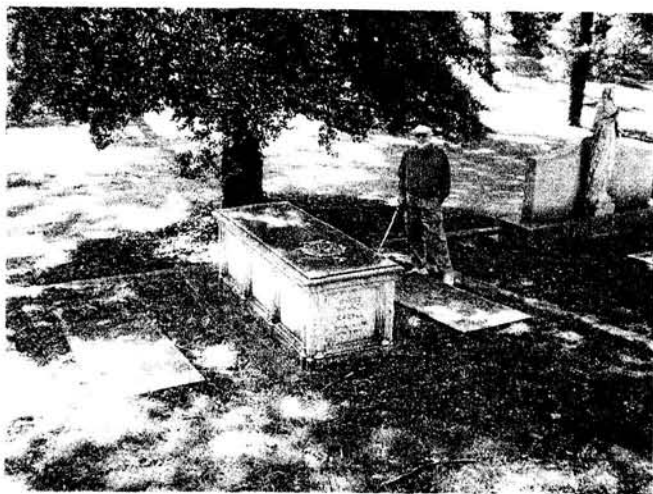


Figure 5. Maurice Duke at James Branch Cabell's grave in Hollywood cemetery, Richmond (photo by the author, April 2010).

ful. Nevertheless, as will shortly be demonstrated, Paquiquineo-Resurrected is actually a feature of current historical writing about the early Jamestown period, which blandly ignores Cabell, the true founder of the school. Cabell, in his book *Let Me Lie* (discussed in more detail below), remarked about Paquiquineo that he (Cabell) wanted to convince Virginians "that in the history of our nation's making, the first chapter was contributed by a Virginian whom they have snubbed and forgotten." Cabell died without seeing Paquiquineo become unsnubbed to the point of lionization and so well remembered as to become featured in a tourist guide book to the so-called Historic Triangle (see below). Cabell must be laughing in his grave (figure 5).

In 1953, only several years before Cabell's death, another Paquiquineo-Resurrected theory appeared in print, this time in *The Spanish Jesuit Mission* by the Jesuit writers Clifford Lewis and Albert Loomie. This book was devoted to a close examination, analysis, and publication of translations of the primary documents related to Paquiquineo.⁶⁴ The authors speculated about the identity of Paquiquineo: "We are therefore left with the following guesses: If Don Luis was

a young man . . . then he was possibly an elder brother of Powhatan. . . . [if an older man] he was in all probability the father of Powhatan . . ." They further speculated that an Indian servant of Paquiquineo from Mexico was the foster brother of Powhatan, and thus Opechancanough.

Having concluded their speculations, Lewis and Loomie acknowledged that their surmise in respect of Opechancanough is "a possibility, admittedly, but one that will appeal more to the novelist than to the historian." This remark is a clear allusion to Cabell the novelist, but he is nowhere acknowledged, or even mentioned, in their 294-page work. However, a mere allusion was better than the total oblivion to which Cabell was about to be subjected by historians for the next half century.

As will shortly be seen, historians have reached a wide range of conclusions about the resurrection of Paquiquineo. But before we examine what the historians have said, let us allow Cabell to have a last word on the fate of Paquiquineo:

Not any more was ever recorded as to the Ajacans with the certainty of an historian. But people say, in the Northern Neck of Virginia, that Nemattanon led his tribesmen up into the Blue Ridge Mountains, and beyond Charlottesville, and so came to a well-sheltered pleasurable land like a hollowed-out crevice in the Alleghanies. This is believed to have been in the present Rockbridge County, near the head of Bratton's Run, where afterward the Rockbridge Alum Springs prospered in levity.⁶⁵ And the tale says that in this valley, for a good long while, they lived undisturbed by any of the Europeans who were now flocking oversea, in always increasing numbers, toward America.⁶⁶

Thus at the end of *The First Gentleman of America*, by transporting Paquiquineo to western Virginia, Cabell demonstrates that he did not fall victim to his own Paquiquineo-Resur-

64. Lewis and Loomie, *Spanish Jesuit Mission in Virginia*, 61.

65. Knowledge of Cabell's personal history helps one understand his writing. Cabell was first taken to Rockbridge Alum Springs as a very young child, and met his first wife there in 1912.

66. Cabell, editorial note, *First Gentleman of Virginia*, 279.

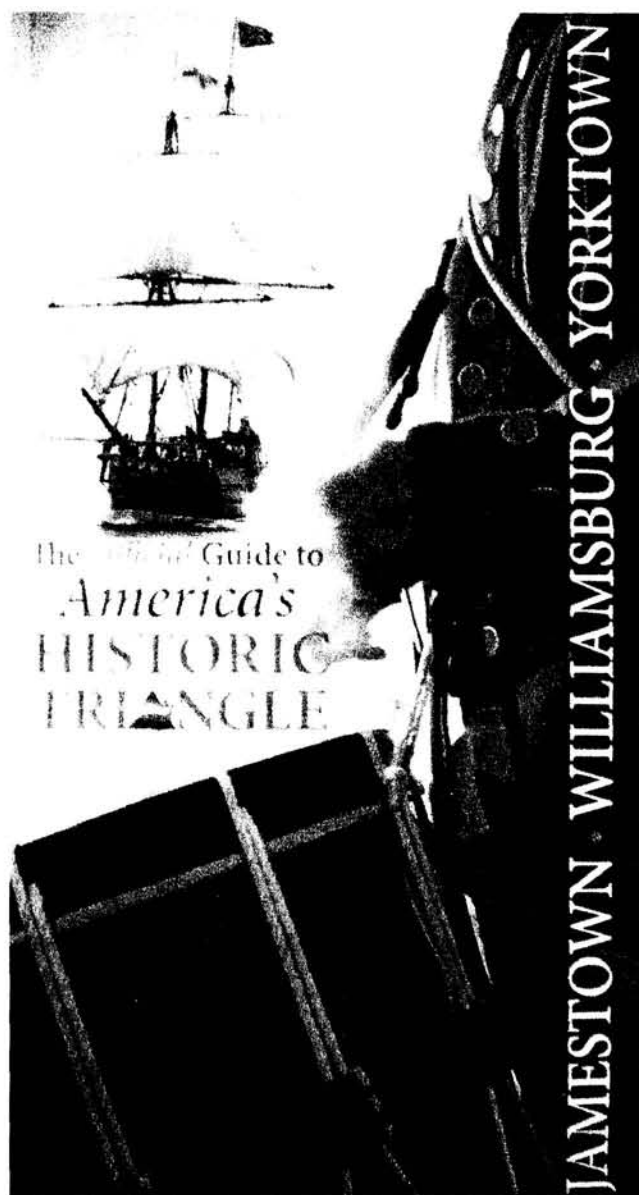


Figure 6. The front cover of the 2007 Official Guide to Virginia's Historic Triangle on Virginia's lower peninsula. This is Virginia history written for tourists.

rected hypothesis and, furthermore, that he did not take himself too seriously. Indeed, in his editorial note he self-deprecatingly wrote:

I believe that the first party of Spaniards

landed, as this book records, and as any rational explorers would have done, upon Hack Neck, or at utmost upon Mob Neck; that the second party went on a bit farther, to the Coan, which was the first tributary they could enter to a distance of "six leagues"; and that Don Luis murdered them, beside (as we know) the Rappahannock, in the neighborhood of Sharps. If I be wrong in any one of, or indeed in all, these beliefs, I cannot see that it gravely matters.⁶⁷

Paquiquineo Resurrected, Cabell Ignored

Six decades after James Branch Cabell wrote that Paquiquineo might have returned to confront the English settlers at Jamestown, that modest, "sardonic possibility" has become a linchpin of popularized history as presented to tourists in the *Official Guide* for the historic triangle of Jamestown, Williamsburg, and Yorktown (see figure 6). This publication devotes an entire chapter to "What to See at Jamestown Settlement," and two pages from that chapter consist of a section titled "Don Luis and Opechancanough," which rather disingenuously hints that the two were one and the same person.⁶⁸

The publication does not mention James Branch Cabell, however, and neither does it use the appellation Paquiquineo. (However, it does include a five-by-five-inch picture of Pawnee Indians, in 1821, performing a "war dance" in front of the Executive Mansion in Washington, D.C. for President James Monroe. That image comes from a contemporary sketch made by the wife of the French ambassador, who witnessed the event.⁶⁹ Cabell would surely have been amused by this odd conjunction.)

For twenty-five years after the 1953 publication of *The Spanish Jesuit Mission*, the story of Paquiquineo was of interest only to specialists of one kind or another. Florida historians such as Eugene Lyon continued to study archived records of the Spanish in the Chesapeake area.⁷⁰ Anthropologists such as William Sturtevant

67. Cabell, editorial note, *First Gentleman of Virginia*, 279.

68. *Jamestown, Williamsburg, Yorktown: The Official Guide to America's Historic Triangle* (Winston-Salem, N.C.: John F. Blair in association with Colonial Williamsburg, 2007), 122–23.

69. Ash Lawn website at <http://www.ashlawnhighland.org/What's New.html> (accessed August 23, 2011).

70. Eugene Lyon, "Adelantamiento of Florida: 1565–1568" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Florida, 1973).

and Christian Feest uncritically accepted the conclusions of Lewis and Loomie in *The Spanish Jesuit Mission*, describing the various American Indian groups who met the arriving English on the lower Chesapeake Bay.⁷¹

Other, more obscure publications from this period that mention Paquiquineo include a booklet whose author suggests “. . . it was Opechancanough, at the head of a band of warriors (Chiaha, perhaps), who appeared on the Axacan on February 1571 and demanded that the Spanish be rooted out”;⁷² a family genealogical work that cites a Cabell reference;⁷³ and an article that asserted Paquiquineo was Powhatan's father.⁷⁴

Then, after languishing for two decades in obscurity, Paquiquineo (as Don Luis) was resurrected in 1980–81 with a resounding boom, with the publication of a pair of closely related essays by the distinguished historian Carl Bridenbaugh, a former president of the American Historical Society, a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society, and the winner of many honors.

Both of his essays featured “Opechancanough” in their titles, with the first appearing in *Jamestown, 1544–1699*,⁷⁵ and the second essay in his *Early Americans*.⁷⁶ In neither of these essays did Bridenbaugh mention Cabell, though Bridenbaugh lived for five years (1945–1950) in

Williamsburg, where he was the first director of the Institute of Early American History and Culture.⁷⁷

It is difficult to accept that Bridenbaugh was unaware of James Branch Cabell's writing about Paquiquineo, but perhaps he was. Bridenbaugh himself records that it was the Irish-born historian David Beers Quinn who first called his attention to the Paquiquineo story. Quinn, however, took the rather sensible view about Paquiquineo that “. . . the story [of the slaying of the Jesuits] is so overlaid with hagiographical invention, and the authentic data so scarce that little more can be said.”⁷⁸

It does not appear that either Bridenbaugh or Quinn acknowledged Cabell in any of their many writings.

Bridenbaugh stated quite directly that he could not prove his Opechancanough-is-Paquiquineo hypothesis.⁷⁹ However, his two essays do leave the strong impression that this is no mere hypothesis, but rather a proven fact. Because of his high professional standing, and also because of the powerful sense of conviction with which he wrote, Bridenbaugh's views dominate the discussion of early Chesapeake history to the present day. Many later historians are restating his views, increasingly expressing skepticism of many of them. Most prominently,

71. William C. Sturtevant, “Spanish-Indian Relations in Southeastern North America,” *Ethnohistory* 9 (1962): 41–94; and Christian Feest, “Virginia Algonquians,” in Bruce G. Trigger, ed., *Handbook of North American Indians, Volume 15 Northeast* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1978), 253–70.

72. William B. Hill, *The Indians of Axacan and the Spanish Martyrs: The Beginnings of Virginia, 1570* (Clarksville, Va.: Prestwold House, 1970).

73. August Burghard, *America's First Family, the Savages of Virginia* (Philadelphia: Dorrance, 1974). The title refers to the European family with that surname, not to America's aboriginal people.

74. Frank Siebert, “Resurrecting Virginia Algonquian From the Dead: The Reconstituted and Historical Phonology of Powhatan,” in James M. Crawford, ed., *Studies in Southeastern Indian Languages* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1975), 285–453.

75. Carl Bridenbaugh, “Opechancanough, the Powhatans, and the White Europeans, 1561–1644,” in *Jamestown, 1544–1699* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); see pp. 10–33 for the discussion of Paquiquineo.

76. Carl Bridenbaugh, “Opechancanough: Native American Patriot,” in *Early Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 5–49.

77. It is now the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture.

78. David B. Quinn, *North America from Earliest Discovery to First Settlements: The Norse Voyages to 1612* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1977), 283.

79. Bridenbaugh's afterword in his *Early Americans* essay reads in part: “I do not contend in the present essay that I have *proved* that Don Luis and Opechancanough were one and the same person, but such conjectures as I have made are consistent with reason and all of the known facts about this great Algonkian leader fit this theory, which clarifies much that before has been obscure. He is too vivid a personality to remain concealed from American history” (see p. 49).

his hypothesis is now part of the aforementioned official tourist history of "America's Historic Triangle." This situation surely would amuse Cabell.

In Bridenbaugh's defense, however, he did mention Bishko's criticism of *The Spanish Jesuit Mission*, in a footnote in *Early Americans*, and it is interesting that evidently no later historians have followed Bridenbaugh in reporting Bishko's criticism. But it is noteworthy that historian Frederick Fausz has written that Bridenbaugh's hypothesis "made an interesting case out of some dubious evidence."⁸⁰

Over the past thirty years, writings about Paquiquineo have greatly accelerated, principally because of a general cultural shift among professional historians to include in their work more information about women, minority peoples, and indigenous persons. Additionally, the years immediately prior to the Jamestown 400th-year settlement anniversary in 2007 brought the publication of many books and articles with accounts of Paquiquineo. None of these mentions Cabell, although many cite the Bridenbaugh hypothesis, albeit regarding it with skepticism.⁸¹ But why Bridenbaugh and not Cabell?

In addition to Fausz, the Virginia anthro-

pologist Helen Rountree has been a strong critic of Bridenbaugh's hypothesis of Paquiquineo-as-Opechancanough. In her 1990 book, *Powhatan Indians*, she says, "No European ever seems to have learned what Don Luis' eventual fate was among his own people," and "I find several points in Bridenbaugh's writing about Opechancanough to be disturbingly ethnocentric . . ."⁸² In her 2006 book, Rountree does not mention Bridenbaugh, but based on a consideration of family relationships among the Virginia Algonquians at the end of the sixteenth century, she concludes flatly that "[t]herefore, Opechancanough could not have been the same man as Don Luis (*Paquiquineo*)."⁸³ (It does not appear that Rountree ever mentions Cabell in any of her writings about Virginia's Indians or any other subject.)

For this writer, the most persuasive evidence that Bridenbaugh's hypothesis is totally untenable comes from the Berkeley historian, James H. Kettner, who wrote "But Jas'town settlers never mention a Spanish speaking werowance?"⁸⁴ That is exactly the right question. John Smith encountered Opechancanough in 1607 a month after the English landed at Jamestown, and the English were in contact with him for thirty-seven years, until 1644. It is not credible

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80. J. Frederick Fausz, "The Invasion of Virginia. Indians, Colonialism, and the Conquest of Cant: A Review Essay on Anglo-Indian Relations in the Chesapeake," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 95 (1987): 133–56. Fausz, incidentally, has been a feisty critic of Virginia historiography, very much in the Cabell tradition, and his spirited polemic of complaints delivered at a Virginia history forum at the Library of Virginia in 2007 is well worth reading. (J. Frederick Fausz, "Jamestown at 400: Caught Between a Rock and a Slippery Slope," with a short introduction, "The Fausz Critique of History," by Jurretta Heckscher, is online at the Library of Virginia listserv at <http://listva.lib.va.us/cgi-bin/wa.exe?A2=VA-HIST:eyTCWQ;20070518172722-0400> [accessed August 20, 2011]. The paper Fausz read at the forum [from which this cited article derived] was provocatively titled "Hoary Myths & Horrid Mistakes: How Cavalier Attitudes about Factual Accuracy Threaten Our Knowledge of Jamestown.")
 81. For example, three books published in 2007 that mention Bridenbaugh but omit Cabell are Daniel K. Richter in his essay "Tsenacommacah and the Atlantic World," in Peter C. Mancall, ed., *The Atlantic World and Virginia, 1550–1624* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, by the University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Karen Ordahl Kupperman, *The Jamestown Project* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007); and John Huxtable Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America 1492–1830* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).
 82. Helen C. Rountree, *Pocahontas's People: the Powhatan Indians of Virginia through Four Centuries* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), 18 and 286.
 83. Helen C. Rountree, *Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough: Three Indian Lives Changed by Jamestown* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 25 ff.
 84. James H. Kettner, marginalia, p. 11 in Carl Bridenbaugh's essay "Opechancanough: Native American Patriot," in Bridenbaugh, *Early Americans*. Kettner's copy of this book is in the present author's library.

JAMES BRANCH CABELL
ST. AUGUSTINE
FLORIDA

My dear Mr. Buck:

Many thanks for directing my attention to the hypotheses of Mr. Scisco. He is quite obviously wrong, I think, both as to the location of the mission and the discovery of Chesapeake Bay, in the light of contemporary and earlier Spanish records, but in any case I found his article to be diverting, and my gratitude to you is commensurate.

Yours faithfully,

James Branch Cabell

Figure 7. Letter from James Branch Cabell to Walter H. Buck of Baltimore, dated February 6, 1946 (original in author's files).

that Opechancanough was a Spanish speaker, and no Englishman ever noticed.

Although it may be difficult to believe, an article written by the present author in 2004 was the first to connect James Branch Cabell to the modern recounting of the Paquiquineo story. In truth, the connection was made completely accidentally by asking the question "Who was the First Virginian?" during a study of an Indian woman, Luisa Menéndez, who came in 1567 from what would later become the future town of Saltville, in Smyth County, and married an invading Spanish soldier.⁸⁵

Subsequently, Peter Wallenstein, in a general work of Virginia history,⁸⁶ and Astrid Fellner in an essay,⁸⁷ have noted the connection.

This section concludes with the first-ever publication of a letter (see figure 7) written by Cabell in 1946 in response to a question about *The First Gentleman of America*. The writer of the letter, apparently a Baltimore lawyer by the name of Walter H. Buck, had sent Cabell a published article about the Spanish-period history of the Chesapeake Bay, written by Louis Dow Scisco, which differed from Cabell's version. Scisco had concluded that the mission site had been near Pamlico Sound in the present-day North Carolina—a long way from Cabell's chosen site in the vicinity of Sharps in Richmond County.

Cabell peremptorily dismissed the conclusions of the article's author.⁸⁸

85. Jim Glanville, "Conquistadors at Saltville in 1567? A Review of the Archeological and Documentary Evidence," *The Smithfield Review* 7 (2004): 70–108.
86. Peter Wallenstein, *Cradle of America: Four Centuries of Virginia History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007). Cabell is mentioned on p. 6 and is in the index.
87. Astrid M. Fellner, "Performing Cultural Memory: Scenarios of Colonial Encounter in the Writings of John Smith, Cabeza de Vaca, and Jacques Cartier," in Udo J. Hebel, ed., *Transnational American Memories* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 33–58.
88. Letter from James Branch Cabell to Walter H. Buck of Buck & Perkins, 809 Union Trust Building, Baltimore, Md., dated February 6, 1946: "My dear Mr. Buck: / Many thanks for directing my attention to the hypotheses of Mr. Scisco. He is quite obviously wrong, I think, both as to the location of the mission and the discovery of Chesapeake Bay, in the light of contemporary and earlier Spanish records, but in any case I found his article to be diverting, and my gratitude to you is commensurate. / Yours faithfully, James Branch Cabell."

The hypotheses of Mr. Scisco had been published in Louis Dow Scisco, "Discovery of the Chesapeake, 1525–1573," *Maryland Historical Magazine* 40 (1945): 275–86.



Figure 8. James Branch Cabell pictured "some time in the 1950s" at his home at 3201 Monument Avenue in Richmond. Cabell would have been about seventy-five when this picture was taken, several years after the publication of his collection of essays titled *Let Me Lie* (by permission, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University Library).

Let Me Lie (1947)

In 1947, at the age of sixty-eight and well into the twilight of his career, Cabell (seen in figure 8) produced *Let Me Lie*.⁸⁹ This work is a mixture of some previously published magazine and newspaper pieces and several new, or mostly new, essays. Cabell awkwardly cobbled together this diverse material with the subtitle "Commentaries on the Commonwealth of Virginia."

The book does not say much about Virginia history, but it has a lot to say about the way Virginia history is written. Some of these essays offer little of interest to the student of Virginia history, whereas others contain Cabell's most trenchant and insightful remarks on the nature of Virginia historiography. The essay "The First Virginian," in which Cabell revisits Paquiquineo as nonfiction, contains his bon mot

that Virginia history "commemorates not what did happen but what ought to have happened" (see figures 9a and 9b).

Here is the full quote:

It is true that beside the wall of the "restored" Catholic Cemetery at Aquia, in remote Stafford County, one finds a bronze tablet "inscribed to the memory of the heroic Jesuit missionaries who, coming from Spain to bring Christ's gospel to the Indians in this Aquia region, erected near by in 1570, A.D., the first Christian temple in our northern land, Our Lady of Ajacan, and, expressly because of their Christian teachings, were by the natives treacherously slain."

Nor would it, I admit, appear seemly to find fault with the precision of a tablet "erected by the Catholic Students' Mission Crusade and their friends of the Diocese of Richmond," beyond noting that the eight Spaniards happen not to have been killed "expressly because of their Christian teachings" (which nobody in Ajacan regarded seriously), but as the advance guard of an army of occupation; as well as that to describe a chapel built in the present Richmond County upon the north bank of the Rappahannock River as being "in this Aquia region," and "near by," exhibits very much the same beguiling light-mindedness as to geography which graced Don Luis de Velasco's own accounts of his country.

Such minor flaws [in the brass tablet in the Aquia Catholic cemetery] one is quick to dismiss, in view of the circumstance that as a sample of Virginiana this tablet is more than sound. It is characteristic. It commemorates not what did happen but what ought to have happened.⁹⁰

Let Me Lie drew a number of harsh reviews. Quoting from among them:

Mr. Cabell, frequently an acid writer,

89. For the full reference for this book, see footnote 38. The author believes that Robert Louis Stevenson's poem "Requiem," which begins "Under the wide and starry sky / Dig the grave and let me lie" is likely the nominal source for this title. This poem is anthologized in the *Oxford Book of English Verse, 1250-1900*, a copy of which belonged to Cabell. Cabell likely intended the title as a comment on Virginia historiography.

90. Cabell, "The First Virginian" essay in *Let Me Lie*, 38-39.



Figure 9a (left). The bronze tablet commemorating the "heroic Jesuit missionaries" in the Brent Catholic cemetery at Aquia, Va. The tablet was erected in 1935 (photo by the author, February 2010). Figure 9b (right). Author's transcription of the tablet.

✠
AD MAIOREM DEI GLORIAM

THIS TABLET IS INSCRIBED
TO THE MEMORY OF THE **HEROIC JESUIT MISSIONARIES**, WHO, COMING FROM SPAIN TO BRING CHRIST'S GOSPEL TO THE INDIANS IN THIS AQUIA REGION, ERECTED NEARBY IN 1570, A. D., THE FIRST CHRISTIAN TEMPLE IN OUR NORTHERN LAND. **OUR LADY OF AJACAN** AND, EXPRESSLY BECAUSE OF THEIR CHRISTIAN TEACHINGS WERE BY THE NATIVES TREACHEROUSLY SLAIN. **LUIS DE QUIROS** PRIEST, **BAPTISTA MENDEZ** AND **GABRIEL DE SOLIS**, SCHOLASTICS. FEBRUARY 4, 1571 **JEAN BAPTISTA DE SEQUERA**, PRIEST **CHRISTOBAL REDONDO**, SCHOLASTIC. **PEDRO LINARES**, **GABRIEL GOMEZ** AND **SANCHO ZEBALLOS**, BROTHERS. FEBRUARY 9, 1571. ALL OF THE SOCIETY OF JESUS, WHO DIED JOYOUSLY AS THEY HAD LIVED AND LABORED NOBLY FOR THE GREATER GLORY OF GOD.

ERECTED BY THE CATHOLIC STUDENTS MISSION CRUSADE AND THEIR FRIENDS OF THE DIOCESE OF RICHMOND. FEAST OF CHRIST THE KING, 1935.

cannot dodge the fact that he is also a becomingly modest writer;⁹¹

Four decades ago, the self-consciousness, the mannered style, the irony, irreverence and iconoclasm of this volume might have offended Virginians and amused their neighbors to north and south, but today it is the tiresome Swan Song of that generation which had as a primary purpose in writing the blasting of tradition and the exhibition of its own shallow cleverness;⁹²

Let Me Lie is a collection of stylistic devices designed to conceal the fact that the author has nothing in particular to say. It is an elegy for the elegist. Here lies James Branch Cabell in *rigor artis*.⁹³

But *Let Me Lie* also drew a number of laudatory reviews:

The writing thru (*sic*) the book is as beautiful, witty, impudent, and sensitive as anything we have come to expect of Mr. Cabell;⁹⁴

[T]here are moments when the reader will indignantly kick up his heels and accuse Mr. Cabell of being pontifical, other-worldish, or cynical. He will frequently resent the necessity of keeping a dictionary, an encyclopedia, and an atlas within arm's reach. But few will deny that the author possess a charm and a detached exuberance which, combined with his delightfully rambling conversational style, make for

91. Allen R. Matthews, "Off the Bookshelves," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, March 9, 1947, section 4, 7.

92. D. H. Moseley, "Review of *Let Me Lie*," *Commonweal* 46 (April 18, 1947): 22.

93. Dan S. Norton, "A Case of *Rigor Artis* in Poictesme," *New York Times*, March 30, 1947, BR5.

94. Edward Wagenknecht, "Witty Cabell Writes Story of Virginia," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 23, 1947, B3.

extremely pleasant reading and recollection.⁹⁵

The single reviewer who showed he understood Cabell's deepest motives for writing *Let Me Lie*, however, was the author's old friend Burton Rascoe:

THAT James Branch Cabell is a "realist," not a "romanticist," an incisive satirist, not a literary confectioner, a hardheaded and hard-boiled commentator on contemporary events, not an "escapist," has been known for thirty-odd years by all except the more obtusely callow of those who have commented upon his work. The true nature of his contribution to literature should be obvious to nearly everybody from this, his forty-fifth, book; because here, in what (for Cabell) are practically words of one syllable and in his most direct idiom, is a most devastating exposé of the myths Virginians live by and a derisory, though compassionate, analysis of the quaint factors in the make-up of that futile anachronism, the well-born Virginia gentleman.⁹⁶

As noted earlier, one simply has to know a lot about Cabell the man to be able to appreciate and understand much of his writing—particularly his nonfiction.

The twenty-page prologue to *Let Me Lie*, titled "Quiet Along the Potomac," is in effect the first essay in that volume. It is Cabell's reflection about Northern Neck history and World War II, as viewed from Poynton Lodge at Ophelia in Northumberland County. Cabell had obviously grown fond of Northumberland County in his more than a decade of living there, as illustrated by his observations on its food and agricultural resources:

[T]he surprisingly fertile soil of Northumberland produces all needed fruits and grains and vegetables upon a minimum provocation of farming. A volunteer

posse of bee martins defends your plowed lands from the thieving crow. Your swine repay lavishly that slight healthful exercise which has disposed of your garbage by emptying it into their troughs. Turkeys and poultry and horses and cattle attend virtually to their own sustenance. Toward autumn, as the calendar counts autumn, rabbits appear to contend during the night season for the honor of being the first rabbit to enter your traps. Alongside the Potomac, all nature of fish and of hardshell crabs require merely to be released from your nets and crab pots, while soft crabs await flaccidly their doom, to be lifted with a hand-net, from out of your private "back creek," into the kitchen.

I concede that partidges and quail and squirrel do demand of an epicure the exertion of hunting them before they consent to become viands; yet almost every acre of Northumberland affords all three; and with this slight churlish exception, food seems to provide itself.⁹⁷

In addition, *Let Me Lie* contains eleven essays, of which seven are important for illuminating traditional Virginia historiography. The nonfiction essay "The First Virginian," about Paquiquineo, was newly written for *Let Me Lie* and shows Cabell's strong and active interest in pre-English Virginia. So does the next essay, "Myths of the Old Dominion," also newly written, which is cast in the form of an imaginary conversation in "the Red Drawing Room of Poynton Lodge, in Northumberland County," between Cabell and the likely fictional Spanish historian of Florida, Dr. Alonzo Juan Hernandez. This essay is Cabell's most direct attack on the state of Virginia historiography.

The essay "Colonel Esmond of Virginia" is a slightly rewritten version of "Homage to Colonel Esmond, Late of Castlewood-in-Virginia," published a decade earlier in 1937, in the *Richmond News Leader*. Although its topic is the 1852 historical novel written by William Makepeace

95. William M. Kunstler, Review of *Let Me Lie*, in *Atlantic Monthly* 179 (May 1947): 160. This reviewer is better known as a highly controversial lawyer, however, than as a book critic.

96. Burton Rascoe, "Cabell Analyzes Certain Virginia Myths: In His Most Intimate and Exhilarating Excursion into Dreams and Anachronisms," *New York Herald Tribune Books* 23 (March 30, 1947): 7.

97. Cabell, *Let Me Lie*, 12–13.

Thackeray about a fictional Virginian, this essay contains some of Cabell's strongest criticism of the way that history for tourists is told in Virginia. The next essay, "Concerns Heirs and Assigns," was newly written for *Let Me Lie*, and harks back to Cabell's Florida experiences and returns to the Paquiquineo theme.

Cabell's essay "Mr. Ritchie's Richmond" derives largely from a 1947 *Vogue* magazine article, and is principally about Charles Dickens and Edgar Allan Poe (with Cabell's added lamentation that Virginia writers are underappreciated in the commonwealth). In this essay's concluding pages, however, Cabell also returns to his criticism of the way history for tourists is presented in Virginia.

The next two essays were both reprinted from 1946 issues of the *Atlantic Monthly*, and both concern the Civil War. The very self-revealing essay, "Almost Touching the Confederacy," deals with Cabell's early childhood and starkly reveals the milieu of the period—postbellum Richmond—in which Cabell grew up, and which he came to understand only many years later after he had discovered Florida.

The essay "General Lee of Virginia" is cast in the form of a letter from Cabell to Gen. Robert E. Lee. It is this author's opinion that this letter had actually been written more than a decade earlier, with the original intent of its being included in *Ladies and Gentlemen* (1934), a collection of letters from Cabell to famous dead persons, but that Cabell withheld the Robert E. Lee letter from that collection because either he was not yet prepared to be so publicly critical of Virginia historiography, or he thought that Virginia readers would react poorly to it.

A small sampling of some of Cabell's thoughts from the essays in *Let Me Lie* follows:

- About Paquiquineo: "So does it follow that from the somewhat rigorously exclusive history of Virginia—which, like all other praiseworthy histories known to mankind, has been compiled by prejudice and edited by fancy—we omit, and we shall continue (I imagine) to omit forever, the first Virginian . . ." (p. 36);

- About Virginia historiography: "Nothing whatever can be done about it, of course, so long as we Virginians continue to edit the official history of our state, as Ellen Glasgow has put it, 'in the more freely interpretative form of fiction,' and at the dictates of personal taste" (p. 42); "How very differently do we shape our his-

tory in Virginia, where we accept such facts as we find desirable and dismiss those which are not to our purpose" (p. 67); "[t]he poetic abandon which graces all our accounts of Virginia" (p. 72); "And no history is a matter of record; it is a matter of faith" (p. 74); "no power in nature can upset the faith of a Virginian of the old school as to the myths among which he was reared . . . he does not ever put up with any nonsense from facts" (pp. 284–85).

- About Jamestown: "There is not at Jamestown any settlement, nor for many decades has the forlorn island been inhabited except by mosquitoes and a caretaker. Jamestown is a mere mob of monuments and memorial tablets. The more charitable might admire Jamestown as a cemetery pleasingly deficient in corpses; but most certainly no one could call it a settlement. How then may we term 'permanent' that which does not exist?" (p. 46); "Jamestown Island [is] burdened with a collection of serio-comic sculpture" (p. 50); and ". . . the absurd hocus-pocus of Pocahontas!" (p. 51).

- About Williamsburg: "a commonwealth so very generally devoted to all nature of antiquities that to manufacture them hath become, of late years, its chief enterprise, some scoffers sneer" (p. 81); and ". . . our restored Williamsburg, as that bric-a-brac but instructive subsidiary of the Standard Oil Company of New Jersey hath been renovated into antiquity during recent times" (p. 91); and "We might likewise be promoting culture in and about Williamsburg, upon a proper mercantile basis, by having hired out an entire town to be demolished into the back-drop for a retired oil magnate's elegant and *recherche* and daily fancy-dress party, among his pensioners' painstaking parodies of the obsolete . . ." (p. 134).

- About his childhood and the Civil War: "For the main business in life of your elders was to create a myth which was not intimately concerned with the perhaps equally great myth of Lincoln, and which in consequence did not need to clash with it. They were creating (so did you decide later), in the same instant that they lamented the Old South's extinction, an Old South which had died proudly at Appomattox without ever having been smirched by the wear and tear of existence. They perverted no facts consciously; but they did omit, from their public utterances or from their printed idyllic narratives, with the tact of a correctly reared person, any such facts as appeared undesirable—without, of

course, ever disclaiming these facts" (pp. 153–54); and "To a child who could not understand that for the health of human ideals every national myth needs to be edited and fostered with an unfailing patience, the discrepancy was puzzling; but you did reason it out, by-and-by. Your elders were not telling any lies, either in private or upon memorial days, about their technically unstained and superhuman heroes, or at least not exactly. It was just that grown people told only a part of the truth when they climbed up on platforms, and did not talk about things which were not nice, such as getting drunk, or like bedpans" (p. 156).

In this author's opinion, James Branch Cabell is the patron saint of eschewing bad Virginia history—or, as he would have said, of not writing Virginia history "as it ought to have happened." Cabell, one hopes, would have appreciated his sanctification.

Some Conclusions

James Branch Cabell made significant and instructive contributions to the study of Virginia history, and he deserves to be recognized for those contributions and especially for his perceptive criticisms of Virginia historiography. Cabell's views as a historian have been ignored by almost all writers of Virginia history, a neglect that in the opinion of the author is lamentable and unscholarly.

Cabell's experiences in Northumberland County, after he moved there in the mid-1930s, in conjunction with his contemporaneous experiences in Florida, combined to change dramatically his perception of Virginia history.

Writing in 1941, in the editorial note in *The First Gentleman*, he was flippant; history at

that time in his life had become fun, and a great diversion for his creative energy. Six years later, against the backdrop of fascism and World War, his essay collection *Let Me Lie* was deadly serious—he means every one of his criticisms to sting. Those criticisms collectively form his own point of view of Virginia history. By 1947, he had finally come to terms with the deep personal sense of betrayal that grew from his full realization that he had for too long been trapped in a self-serving and romanticized view of Virginia history. His reaction was to argue strongly for telling history as truthfully as possible, that is, as truthfully as the record allows.

In the end, the value of Cabell's work is less in the corpus of his historical writings (which is quite modest) than in his clear and penetrating vision of the basic flaws that underlie much of the writing of Virginia history, which flaws remain in evidence today. The recent writing of J. Frederick Fausz, in connection with the 400th Jamestown anniversary events, has once again highlighted those flaws in the best Cabellian tradition. An important lesson that Cabell the historian teaches us is that much of publicly told history in Virginia is bad history. For example, the brass plate at Aquia (see figures 9a and 9b) is wrong in saying the Jesuits were killed for their Christian teachings and gets the place wrong; serious historians suggest various sites for the killing, but Aquia is not one of them.

In 1958, Edmund Wilson asked rhetorically, "What, one wonders, at the time he was writing these books, had made Cabell's imagination so black?"⁹⁸ The reference was to Cabell's writings around 1947. The answer to Wilson's question may simply be that Cabell was at long last coming to terms with his youthful inculcation into a mythical version of Virginia history.

98. Edmund Wilson, "James Branch Cabell: 1879–1958," *The Nation* 186 (June 7, 1958): 519–20.