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# WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

**In the last part of our State Lines series, Leonard Doyle visits Virginia, a territory brimming with history, as well as deer, misty mountains and wine fit for a president**

**O**n a pitch-black night in Manassas, near the site of the first major land battle of the American Civil War, about 80,000 people gathered in the Virginia countryside for a last hurrah of the 2008 presidential race. It was 3 November, unseasonably balmy, and the open-air fairground was filled to capacity. Like hundreds of others I had to settle for a spot on a road outside. There were no streetlights; the blue and red flashing police lights cast an eerie glow over the faces of people as they moved through the shadows. As we waited – black, white and Asian – for Barack Obama's final rally, it was a chance to reflect on Virginia's tumultuous history: the

slavery, tobacco plantations, and disastrous civil war from which the state has never really recovered.

High overhead, two Sikorsky helicopters patrolled as if the torch had already been passed, although voting was still hours away. The state had voted Republican in every presidential election for the last 40 years, but this year it opted heavily for Barack Obama. Change had finally come to the capital of the old slave-owning confederacy.

Virginia has produced more national leaders than any other state, including four of the first five presidents: Washington, Jefferson, Madison and Monroe. It seems as though every

Virginia town has a plaque announcing that "George Washington slept here".

To travel this state is to be constantly reminded of some of the most troubled periods of American history. More than one third of all battles of the American Civil War took place here. The confrontations at Chancellorsville, Spotsylvania and Bull Run (or Manassas as it is known in the South) were among the costliest in terms of lives wasted. That Barack Obama chose to make his final appearance near one of the bloodiest Civil War battlefields was striking. Perhaps he was setting the scene in order to stand alongside the pantheon of local-born presidents.

A few weeks after the election, I took a road trip through Virginia, carving a broad arc from the Potomac River and Washington DC in the north,

westwards to the Shenandoah Valley. I then headed south and east through Virginia's horse and wine country and on to Jefferson's home in Monticello. Finally, I travelled east to the coast to Colonial Williamsburg and the Jamestown Settlement.

On the way from Washington to the Shenandoah Valley there were signs everywhere declaring "Virginia – McCain Country." It almost seemed as though the election was still being fought. It was perhaps not surprising that Obama's drubbing of McCain still rankled: many Virginians have not got over the defeat in the Civil War.

I skirted the site of Obama's final rally and headed for Manassas National Battlefield Park. In the summer of 1861, enthusiastic volunteers gathered

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here to fight the first major land battle of the war. Both sides were confident that their foes would cut and run; neither had anticipated the horrors of battle.

First time round, the Confederates won a narrow victory. A year later, both sides met again on the same battlefield and the Confederates – at the height of their power – trounced the Union side. I took a tour with a guide from the National Park Service, who revealed the smoke, din and slaughter of the battlefield.

From Manassas, I headed west towards the Blue Ridge Mountains and Skyline Drive, a highway that winds its way for 105 miles along a ridge of

north-south peaks. It was built by President Franklin Roosevelt's three million-strong "Tree Army" during the Great Depression. These unemployed people were sent to the forests and fields in the 1930s to build roads and parks. One of their tasks, never fully acknowledged, was to turn wilderness areas that were the hunting grounds of Native American tribes into national parks. The expropriation continued until well into the 1940s.

The road runs alongside one of the most beautiful sections of the Appalachian Trail, which teems with waterfalls and mountain paths. An ever-present blue haze hangs over the forested slopes, caused by water droplets and gas molecules being released by trees (it was noticed way back in 1728 by William Byrd, who described

it as "ranges of blue clouds rising one above another"). Sadly, the phenomenon seems to be disappearing, as suburbia encroaches ever closer into the

Shenandoah Valley.

The first snows of winter had fallen. From the switch-back road I saw stunning vistas of the open country to the west. It's a lovely drive in the off-season; there was time to stop and take photographs, and read the historical markers along the way.

The Skyland Resort is a popular hotel located at the highest point on the Skyline Drive (3,680 feet) and owned by the state of Virginia. It has a rustic 1940s charm, friendly staff and stunning views – but it is also in urgent need of a makeover. The rooms are dotted in block-houses around the woods, but the concrete walkways, unpainted

railings and bare wooden doors have little charm. Nevertheless, the stunning views over the mountains, the white-tail deer grazing right outside my bedroom window and the peregrine falcons hovering nearby were impressive enough distractions.

At dinner that evening, I sampled a superb bottle of wine produced by Jefferson Vineyards in nearby Monticello, home of Thomas Jefferson. The third president of the United States was also the country's first wine connoisseur; the grounds of his estate are kept in a shrine-like state, as befits one of the country's founders.

In his five years as ambassador to Paris from 1784 to 1789, Jefferson developed a taste for France's finest vintages. He travelled extensively to the top vineyards – Margaux, Meursault, Volnay, Yquem and Hermitage – and wrote about them in his journal. His love of wine continued

into old age; in 1824 alone, he

and his guests managed to down 1,203 bottles.

One of Jefferson's great feats was helping to draft the uplifting Declaration of Independence. Then, as president, he doubled the landmass of the United States with the 1803 Louisiana Purchase.

Jefferson designed the University of Virginia. His extensive collection of books is the basis of the one of the world's

great collections at the Library of Congress. But as a winemaker, Jefferson fell flat on his face. This had more to do with the difficult Virginia climate than lack of effort. While in Paris, he took cuttings from the Clos de Vougeot, which he later planted at Monticello. Sadly, although Jefferson grew grapes for some 55 years in the hills of Virginia, James Gabler notes in *Passions: The*

*Wines and Travels of Thomas Jefferson* that there is scant evidence he managed to produce a single bottle of wine. Rains, early freezes and the dreaded phyloxera bug all put paid to Jefferson's winemaking.

He remained convinced that the potential was there, writing in 1811 that "We have every soil, aspect and climate of the best wine countries, and I have myself drunk wines made in this state and in Maryland of the quality of the best Burgundy." Now, two centuries after Jefferson, good-quality Virginia wines are being produced near Monticello, and elsewhere around the state.

From Monticello, I travelled to the coast. In Colonial Williamsburg, there were more echoes of Jefferson, who was a rebellious political leader here. When I visited, a member of the Colonial Williamsburg corps of actors played Jefferson delivering one of his stirring speeches from the

front of the assembly building. It was a masterful presentation; he encouraged insurrection, then changed his tone as a pair of redcoat soldiers passed by – a chilling and evocative moment.

Jamestown, which is part of the Colonial National Historical Park is further down the road. It was here in 1607, 13 years before the Pilgrims landed in Massachusetts, that an ill-equipped and unlikely group of 104 gentlemen started what would become the first permanent English colony of the new world. They picked an island beside a malarial swamp to set up camp and were soon using slaves to clear forests and grow tobacco. They also soon found themselves clashing with the natives.

A wooden footbridge links to the island and down by the James River, where the brick outlines of the original town remain. The ruins of the 1639 church tower are also visible in the place where Virginia's

first tobacco farmer, John Rolfe, married Pocahontas.

This return to the place where it all began seemed to mark a fitting end to an extraordinary political period –

and the beginning of what may turn out to be a new era in Washington DC.

*Leonard Doyle is US editor of "The Independent"*

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## STATE LINES 50. VIRGINIA

**Population** 7 million  
**Area** five times the size of Wales  
**Capital** Richmond  
**Date in Union** 25 June 1788  
**Flower** Dogwood  
**Motto** "Thus always to tyrants"  
**Nickname** Old Dominion State



## TRAVELLER'S GUIDE

### Getting there

The easiest approach is from Washington DC, which is served from Heathrow by British Airways (0844 493 0787; ba.com), Virgin Atlantic (08705 747 747; virgin-atlantic.com) and United Airlines (0845 8444 777; unitedairlines.co.uk).

### Staying there

Skyland Resort, Shenandoah National Park (001 540 999 2212; visitshenandoah.com). Doubles from \$97 (£65).

### Visiting there

Colonial Williamsburg, 101a Visitor Center Drive,

Williamsburg (001 757 229 1000; history.org). Open 9am-5pm daily; \$9 (£6).  
Jamestown Settlement, Route 31 South, Williamsburg (001 757 253 4838; history-isfun.org). Open 9am-5pm daily; \$13.50 (£9).  
Manassas National Battlefield Park (001 703 361 1339; nps.gov/mana).

Jefferson Vineyards, 1353 Thomas Jefferson Parkway, Charlottesville (001 434 977 3042; jeffersonvineyards.com). Open daily 9am-5pm.

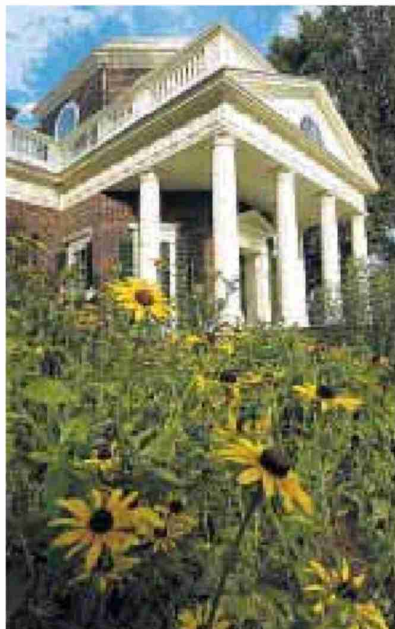
### More information

Virginia Tourism: 020-8339 6048; virginia.org

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**War relic: (clockwise from left) a retired cannon on the battlefields; Shenandoah Park; Jefferson's home, Monticello; Jamestown Settlement** ALEX WONG/GETTY; KAREN BLEIER/AFP/GETTY



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