

Away, I'm Bound Away, Who Went West?

The Athenaeum Society
Hopkinsville, Kentucky

William T. Turner
October 4, 2012

AWAY, I'M BOUND AWAY, WHO WENT WEST?

Long ago an unknown individual pinned the lyrics to a well known song.

Oh, Shenandoah, I long to hear you

Away, you rolling river.

Oh, Shenandoah, I long to hear you,

Away, I'm bound away, 'cross the wide Missouri.

Americans have always been a people on the move. In fact, some historians argue that mobility is what distinguished us as Americans. No other people have been so willing and able to pick up, take off, and lay down roots somewhere else. This has been true throughout our history.

The move west began with a decision. For William and Betsey Cayce and their children, the decision was months, maybe years in the making. Whatever their reasons, in the fall of 1815, they prepared for a fateful journey. The particulars of why they were taking such an important step are not known.

Family records indicate that William Cayce was born in Cumberland County, Virginia, shortly after the American Revolution. He married Betsey Garrett of Buckingham County in 1806 and in the next nine years the couple had produced five children. Five more children would follow, born in Tennessee and Kentucky. The Cayce's made their living on a farm. In 1815, however, powerful forces tugged the

family westward. Were they unhappy with their lot in Virginia – worn out land, crowded living conditions, taxes, or were they drawn by reports of reasonably priced land, rich soil, abundant wild game and a fresh water supply in the west? One can only speculate.

When the time came to leave, William and Betsey packed up as much as they could take in a wagon, bade tearful farewell to family and friends; then headed down the great migrant highway, never to return to Virginia.

Some six weeks into the journey, they crossed into Tennessee. Days later at Knoxville, they headed due west. In a week they climbed up the great Cumberland Plateau, following a primitive road used by tens of thousands of migrants for more than 40 years. Several days later, some two months after leaving Buckingham County, the Cayce family rolled their wagon down the highlands into the rich soil and river bottoms of Williamson County, Tennessee where their journey ended. Here they joined William's mother and his brothers and sisters. Some ten years later, after a brief stay in Montgomery County, Tennessee, near her father, Isaac Garrett, they settled in Christian County, Kentucky near Locust Grove Baptist Church.

Here the family prospered, bought and farmed land; united with the Baptist Church, and begat 69 grandchildren. William died in 1830; Elizabeth in 1869. Most of their children and grandchildren remained in this county, but some continued the great folk migration westward to Illinois, Missouri, and Texas. Their offspring continues a

cycle of movement, begun in France centuries ago and now expanded throughout the United States. One of their great grandsons was this speaker's grandfather. The story of this branch of the family is one that can be repeated in only slightly altered form by all present tonight.

If there is any constant in American history, it is that we are a nation of movers. All American families have been participants in part or all of the three great migrations in our history – from elsewhere to these shores, then from east to west and finally from country to city. In the last half century there is a fourth – from city to suburb. These great migrations have profoundly shaped the course of American history.

“The M-Factor”-mobility, movement, and migration – has been an important part of the Virginia story as well. All Virginians, even their Indians, had moved there from someplace else – Asia, Europe, or Africa. Virginians moved across the state and eventually moved out of the state. Between the end of the American Revolution and the beginning of the Civil War, more than 1,000,000 Virginians picked up, took off, and laid down roots somewhere else.

Who were these people? They were Virginians of all classes, women as well as men, and blacks as well as whites. They came from every city and county in the state. Three future presidents, William Henry Harrison from Charles City, Zachary Taylor from Orange, and Woodrow Wilson from Staunton, left Virginia during these years.

At least 227 men born in Virginia before 1810 went on to represent other states in the United States Congress. Among those were Hanover's Henry Clay and Rockbridge County's John Brown. Working class white Virginians left. Jim Bridger, the famous mountain man, was the son of a tavern keeper in Richmond. He was eight years old when his family took him to Missouri. Over one two-year period, 25 percent of the white landowners in Sussex County disappeared from the tax roles. African Americans both free and slave also left Virginia.

WHERE DID THEY GO?

In many ways, the term "Westward Movement" is a misnomer. Virginians went west, but they also went South, North, and East. The word "frontier" is more appropriate than the word "west." But "frontier" is hard to define. It is a transitory place with indefinite boundaries. The frontier was different places at different times. With the founding of Jamestown, Virginia was the frontier. By the end of the seventeenth century, the frontier extended along the fall line and into the Piedmont. Governor Alexander Spotswood helped extend the frontier into the Valley of Virginia. Several generations later, Southwest Virginia, the mysterious land of "western waters," became the frontier. For Virginians in the years immediately before the American Revolution, the frontier was Tennessee.

TENNESSEE

The Great Philadelphia Wagon Road carried German and Scotch-Irish settlers from Pennsylvania into Virginia's Shenandoah Valley. But the Shenandoah proved to be only a rest stop, as the road continued south. In 1769, Virginia's William Bean crossed the border and entered the part of North Carolina that would later become Tennessee. Within three years, several hundred settlers joined Bean along the Watauga River.

In 1779, Accomack native John Donelson led a flotilla of flatboats nearly 1,000 miles down the Holston and Tennessee Rivers to the Ohio, northeast to the Cumberland, and up the Cumberland River to the present site of Nashville. His party included 120 women and children. One child, Donelson's thirteen-year-old daughter Rachel, later married Andrew Jackson.

KENTUCKY

At the time of Donelson's expedition, 176 settlers lived in the area of Virginia known as Kentucky. This was thirty years after Albemarle County native Dr. Thomas Walker crossed through the Cumberland Gap and into land known to the Indians as the "dark and bloody ground." Indian resistance delayed settlement, but with the Battle of Point Pleasant in 1774 and the dictated peace that followed, migrants arrived in droves.

Within a dozen years, the number of settlers in Kentucky swelled to 30,000, perhaps as many as half of whom crossed through the Cumberland Gap from Virginia.

Virginians also flowed into the Old Northwest Territory – Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. They spread into Missouri even before the Louisiana Purchase and then were struck with “Texas fever.” California and Oregon beckoned in the 1840’s and the final phase of Virginia’s westward migration occurred when the Homestead Act of 1862 opened the Great Plains.

The cultivation of this land was greatly facilitated by a number of technological advances- particularly the development of the reaper. Invented and perfected by Rockbridge County native Cyrus H. McCormick, the reaper revolutionized American agriculture and helped ensure the rapid settlement of the Great Plains.

WHY DID THEY LEAVE?

The exhaustion of Virginia’s soil, overpopulation, and the opening of new lands in the west and south not only had a direct bearing on the voluntary migration of white Virginians, but also greatly affected the forced migration of Virginia slaves. Because slaves could be sold at a great profit, a tremendous number were sold out of Virginia. In 1836, James Somerville wrote of a tavern keeper in Knoxville, Tennessee, who claimed that 40,000 slaves, bound for Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas, passed by his establishment over the years.

One study estimates that near 300,000 were sold from Virginia between 1830 and 1860. If you were a slave in the Upper South during these years, there was a 30% chance that you would be sold to a slave trader before your fortieth birthday.

Slavery greatly influenced the migration of Virginia's free black population as well. In response to growing fears of slave insurrection, the 1806 Virginia General Assembly passed legislation that required emancipated slaves to leave the state within twelve months or forfeit their freedom. Some blacks left. Others stayed, either with or without permission of the legislature or local court. In the wake of Nat Turner's insurrection in 1831, even more restrictive laws were passed, including one that made it illegal to teach African-Americans to read and write. As a result, many free blacks left Virginia.

Individual Virginians left the state for many different reasons. In 1836, Joseph Glover Baldwin, a twenty-one-year-old lawyer from Winchester, set out for the frontier. To Baldwin, the frontier was the promised land. Other Virginians fled to escape debt. So common was this practice that un-served writs were often returned endorsed by the sheriff with only the initials "G.T.T.": Gone To Texas.

Yet the reason most Virginians left can be summed up in a single word – land. Moses Austin, who later helped establish an American colony in Texas, wrote, "Ask

these Pilgrims what they expect when they git to Kentucky, the answer is land. Have you any? No, but I expect I can git it. Have you anything to pay for land? No. Did you ever see the country? No, but every body says its good land.”

HOW DID THEY GET THERE?

They walked and they rode. Most migrants traveled by road, river, or a combination of the two. Some rode on horseback, either mounted on a standard saddle or on a pillion, a two-seated saddle that allowed husband and wife to ride together. Some migrants walked or rode beside a wagon that carried belongings. Most traveled in groups. They often traveled with their families and neighbors. They also moved together for mutual protection and assistance.

Travelers followed the traces and trails that the buffalo and Indians had used for centuries. They also blazed new trails. The Great Philadelphia Wagon Road, which extended down the Shenandoah Valley, followed a trail created by migrating buffalo herds. By 1775, the road reached the Long Island of the Holston River. From there Daniel Boone and 30 men blazed the Wilderness Trail into Kentucky. Until 1796, when the road was widened to accommodate wagons, settlers plodded through the narrow gap

that cut between two five-hundred foot cliffs. By 1880, more than 200,000 emigrants had crossed through Cumberland Gap and into Kentucky and the Ohio Valley. Now, reconstructed as it was then, this speaker and his wife walked the Gap two summers ago.

The Great Wagon Road forked west of Abingdon, Virginia – the right fork led to Cumberland Gap and through the mountains to Kentucky's bluegrass section.

The left fork pointed settlers westward toward Knoxville and beyond into Middle Tennessee and southwestern Kentucky.

The Long Island of the Holston was the terminus of the Great Wagon Road, but it was also the starting point for the flatboat trip that carried the settlers down river to the Tennessee and the Ohio. By 1818, steamboats appeared on the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, not only making travel more comfortable, but also making the trip up river easier.

One vehicle commonly used by Virginia migrants was the Conestoga wagon. Designed by German settlers in Pennsylvania's Conestoga Valley, the wagon was originally developed to carry produce to market. Typically, the wagon had a curved carriage, perhaps to keep the cargo from shifting as the wagon went over hills. The Conestoga had no bench for the driver, who would either walk or ride beside it. Families would sleep underneath their wagons, or at a house or inn along the road.

WHAT DID THEY TAKE WITH THEM?

Flour, salt, coffee, and sugar were often among the staples Virginia travelers loaded into their wagons and carried west. In addition, they often packed seeds, farm tools, cooking utensils, linen, and clothing. Many people also took small luxuries—special items that reminded them of home. James McBride and his wife took a complete china tea service by pack mule to Kentucky. John Donelson loaded his small writing desk on a flatboat and hauled it to Nashville. Elizabeth McClure, whose family repaired timepieces, took one of her father's clocks to Missouri and Texas. Others, however, took little more than the clothes on their backs. But when Virginians moved to the frontier, they also took things in their heads.

They took with them their ideas, their institutions, and their ways of doing things. We call these “folkways.” Our folkways include how we cook our food, our dress, how we build our homes, and as exemplified by how we mark the graves of loved ones. They also include our traditions and customs, such as how we celebrate holidays and mark life's passages. They also include things that are not so easy to see, such as ideas and attitudes on how we treat the elderly, how we define family, how we raise our children, and how we view equality. These are also folkways. And Virginians took them to the frontier.

Some of the folkways taken west by Virginians are easily visible in the landscape. They used a metes-and-bounds system that marked boundaries by natural features, such as streams, creeks, trees, rocks, and surveyors' stakes. Virginia farms assumed almost any shape. This irregular pattern of land division was also reflected in larger political units, such as townships and counties.

Architecture is another folkway that is easy to see. Virginians took their building ways to the frontier. One common Virginia house was two stories tall with a chimney on each end. It was one-room deep with a central passageway that connected the front and back doors and bisected the house. Because there was little snow in Virginia, the homes had a low pitched roof. A raised foundation prevented dry rot and a double portico graced the front. This two story porch was introduced in the United States by Thomas Jefferson and incorporated into the original Monticello. This house is known to us today as an "I" house, because of its prevalence in Indiana and Illinois. This style was utilized throughout the Ohio Valley and many examples remain in our area today, including the one in which this speaker resides.

Some folkways, such as attitudes toward wealth, are not so easily visible in the landscape. Nonetheless, they too were carried to the frontier. Some believed that the frontier was the great leveler- that the frontier promoted equality.

Where Virginians settled, inequality was as great or greater on the frontier as it was back home. Virginians in Ohio and Kentucky found themselves in societies very much like the one they left, with wealth, land, and power concentrated in the hands of a few.

When Virginians moved, they did not move into a vacuum. They moved into a frontier that was inhabited by Indians and that was being settled by people from New England, Pennsylvania, New York and other areas. This caused conflict-not only conflict with the Indians over land, but also conflict with others over the structure of this new society. Virginians wanted to recreate their society. Northerners wanted to recreate theirs. In some cases, the differences were small and could be reconciled easily. Virginia houses could coexist with New England houses. Virginia barns could coexist with Pennsylvania barns. But, what about attitudes toward slavery and the nature of equality? Could these be reconciled easily? Clearly, they could not.

Conclusion

WHAT MAKES US AMERICANS?

People in new settlements did not discard old cultures. The rule was to change where necessary, preserve where possible.

A free society developed on Virginia's frontier from the cultural diversity of migrants clinging to old ways in a new environment.

Social mobility increased on the frontier, but inequality persisted.

The West beckoned to all people, but elites took the lead and shaped new settlements to suit their interests.

The frontier was a safety valve, but not for everyone.

Free land fostered freedom in some places and slavery in others. What made the difference was the culture carried west.

The westward movement did not fuse Americans into a single culture but allowed them space to preserve their differences.

The westward movement facilitated “the pursuit of happiness” but did not guarantee its fulfillment.

William T. Turner

September 20, 2012