

2d ed. revised and enlarged, 1722

“the best poor Man’s Country in the World”

Robert Beverley, Jr.

The History and Present State of Virginia

first published 1705; revised and enlarged 1722

BOOK IV: EXCERPTS

An abundance of publications titled “The Present State of . . .” appeared in American colonial history. Some disappeared from notice after one printing, while others went through multiple printings and are often cited today. One of the latter is Robert Beverley’s *The History and Present State of Virginia*. Son of a prominent Virginia plantation owner, Beverley served as a Virginia legislator and official before writing his “status report” on the colony to refute errors he identified in an Englishman’s account. In these excerpts, he combines lavish and at times over-optimistic praise of the colony’s situation with acerbic criticism of the governor’s arrogance and the settlers’ “slothful indolence.”

BOOK IV. Of the Present State of VIRGINIA.

PT. I. Of the Civil Polity and Government of Virginia.

CH. VII. OF THE CHURCH AND CHURCH AFFAIRS.

...
 The People are generally of the Church of England, which is the Religion established by Law in that Country [i.e., colony], from which there are very few Dissenters. Yet Liberty of Conscience is given to all other Congregations pretending to Christianity, on condition they submit to all Parish Duties [fees]. They have no more than five Conventicles amongst them, namely, three small Meetings of Quakers and two of Presbyterians. ’Tis observ’d that those Counties where the Presbyterian Meetings are produce very mean Tobacco, and for that reason can’t get an Orthodox Minister to stay amongst them;¹ but whenever they could, the People very orderly went to Church. As for the Quakers, ’tis observ’d by letting them alone, they decrease daily.

The Maintenance for a Minister there is appointed by Law at 16,000 pounds of Tobacco per Annum [per year] (be the Parish great or small) as also a Dwelling-House and Glebe [parish land], together with certain Perquisites for Marriages and

National Humanities Center, 2008: nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/. Full text of 1722 edition online from the Library of Congress at hdl.loc.gov/loc.gdc/lhbc.06557. Punctuation and some spelling modernized by NHC for clarity. Title page, frontispiece, and devices from 1722 edition. Complete image credits at nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/becomingamer/imagcredits.htm.

¹ In Virginia at the time, clergy were often paid in tobacco, not in cash.

BOOK IV
Of the Present State of VIRGINIA.

[excerpted chapters in bold type]

**PT. I. OF THE CIVIL POLITY AND
GOVERNMENT OF VIRGINIA.**

- CH. I. Of the Constitution of Government in Virginia.
- CH. II. Of the Sub-divisions of Virginia.
- CH. III. Of the Public Offices of the Government.
- CH. IV. Of the Standing Revenues, or Public Funds in Virginia.
- CH. V. Of the Levies for payment of the Public County, and Parish Debts.
- CH. VI. Of the Courts of Law in Virginia.
- CH. VII. Of the Church and Church Affairs.**
- CH. VIII: Concerning the College. [William and Mary, founded 1692]
- CH. IX. Of the Militia in Virginia.**
- CH. X. Of the Servants and Slaves in Virginia.**
- CH. XI. Of the Other Public Charitable Works**
...
- CH. XII. Of the Tenure by which they hold their Lands; and of their Grants.
- CH. XIII. Of the Liberties and Naturalization of Aliens in Virginia.
- CH. XIV. Of the Currency and Valuation of Coins in Virginia.

**PT. II. OF THE HUSBANDRY AND
IMPROVEMENTS OF VIRGINIA.**

- CH. XV. Of the People, Inhabitants of Virginia.
- CH. XVI. Of the Buildings in Virginia.
- CH. XVII. Of the Edibles [Food], Potables [Beverages], and Fuel in Virginia.
- CH. XVIII. Of the Clothing in Virginia.
- CH. XIX. Of the Temperature of the Climate, and the Inconveniences Attending It.
- CH. XX. Of the Diseases Incident to Virginia.
- CH. XXI. Of the Recreations and Pastimes Used in Virginia.
- CH. XXII. Of the Natural Product of Virginia and the Advantages of their Husbandry.

Funeral Sermons. That which makes the difference in the Benefices of the Clergy is the value of the Tobacco, according to the distinct Species of it, or according to the place of its Growth. Besides in large and rich Parishes, more Marriages will probably happen, and more Funeral Sermons. . . .

In some Parishes likewise there are stocks of Cattle and Negroes on the Glebes, which are also allow'd to the Minister for his Use and Encouragement, he only being accountable for the surrender of the same value when he leaves the Parish. . . .



CH. IX. OF THE MILITIA IN VIRGINIA.

The Militia are the only standing Forces in Virginia. They have no Fortress nor so much as any Cannon fit for Service. Neither are any of these made use of, except six small Pieces, that formerly were mounted on the Fort at James Town; but these are now remov'd to Williamsburg where they are of no use but to fire upon some Joyful Occasions. They are happy in the enjoyment of an Everlasting Peace, which their Poverty and want [lack] of Towns secure to them. They have the Indians round about in Subjection and have no sort of Apprehension from them: And for a Foreign Enemy, it can never be worth their while to carry Troops sufficient to conquer the Country; for the scattering Method of their Settlement will not answer the charge of an Expedition to plunder them. So that they feel none but the distant effects of War, which, however keep 'em so poor that they can boast of nothing but the security of their Persons and Habitations. They fear no other Enemy, but only now and then an insolent and oppressive Governor, who is pleas'd to abuse the Queen's Authority by perverting it into Arbitrary Power, and to exasperate the People by their barbarous Treatment. . . .



CH. X. OF THE SERVANTS AND SLAVES IN VIRGINIA.

...

Slaves are the Negroes, and their Posterity [offspring], following the condition of the Mother, according to the Maxim [law], *partus sequitur ventrem*.² They are call'd Slaves in respect of the time of their Servitude, because it is for Life.

Servants are those which serve only for a few years, according to the time of their Indenture [servant contract] or the Custom of the Country. The Custom of the Country takes place upon such as have no Indentures. The Law in this case is that if such Servants be under Nineteen years of Age, they must be brought into Court to have their Age adjudged, and, from the Age they are judg'd to be of, they must

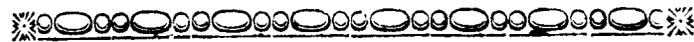
² The offspring have the same legal status (i.e., free or slave) as the mother, not the father.

serve until they reach four and twenty. But if they be adjudged upwards of Nineteen, they are then only to be Servants for the term of five Years.

The Male-Servants and Slaves of both Sexes are employed together in Tilling and Manuring the Ground, in Sowing and Planting Tobacco, Corn, &c. [etc.] Some Distinction indeed is made between them in their Clothes and Food, but the Work of both is no other than what the Overseers, the Freemen, and the Planters themselves do.

Sufficient Distinction is also made between the Female-Servants and Slaves, for a White Woman is rarely or never put to work in the Ground if she be good for anything else. And to Discourage all Planters from using any Women so, their Law imposes the heaviest Taxes upon Female-Servants working in the Ground, while it suffers [the law allows] all other white Women to be absolutely exempted. Whereas, on the other hand, it is a common thing to work a Woman Slave out of Doors; nor does the Law make any Distinction in her Taxes, whether her Work be Abroad, or at Home.

Because I have heard how strangely cruel and severe the Service of this Country is represented in some parts of England, I can't forbear affirming that the work of their Servants and Slaves is no other than what every common Freeman does. Neither is any Servant requir'd to do more in a Day than his Overseer. And I can assure you, with a great deal of Truth, that generally their Slaves are not worked near so hard, nor so many Hours in a Day, as the Husbandmen, and Day-Laborers in England. An Overseer is a Man that, having served his time, has acquired the Skill and Character of an experienced Planter and is therefore entrusted with the Direction of the Servants and Slaves. . . .



CH. XI. OF THE OTHER PUBLIC CHARITABLE WORKS, AND PARTICULARLY, THEIR PROVISION FOR THE POOR.

They live in so happy a Climate and have so fertile a Soil that nobody is poor enough to beg, or want [lack] Food, though they have abundance of People that are lazy enough to deserve it. I remember the time when five pound was left by a charitable Testator to the Poor of the Parish he lived in; and it lay nine years before the Executors could find one poor enough to be entitl'd to any part of this Legacy; and at last it was all given to one old Woman. So that this may in truth be term'd the best poor Man's Country in the World. But as they have nobody that is poor to beggary, so they have few that are rich; because their Goods are so heavily burden'd with Duties [import taxes] in England that they seldom can make any advantage of 'em.

“the best poor Man's Country in the World”

When it happens that by Accident or Sickness any Person is disabled from Working and so is forc'd to depend upon the Alms [charitable funds] of the Parish, he is then very well provided for; not at the common rate of some Countries that give but just sufficient to preserve the poor from perishing, But the unhappy Creature is receiv'd into some charitable Planter's House where he is at the Public Charge [expense], boarded very plentifully.

Many, when they are very Aged or by long Sickness become Poor, will sometimes ask to be free from Levies and Taxes; but very few do ever ask for the Parish-Alms, or indeed, so much as stand in need of them.

There are large tracts of Land, Houses, and other things granted to Free-Schools for the Education of Children in many parts of the Country; and some of these are so large that of themselves they are a handsome Maintenance to a Master. But the additional Allowance which Gentlemen give with their Sons render them a comfortable Subsistence. These Schools have been founded by the Legacies of well inclin'd Gentlemen, and the Management of them hath commonly been left to the Direction of the Country-Court or to the Vestry of the respective Parishes, and I have never heard that any of those Pious Uses have been Mis-apply'd. In all other Places where such Endowments have not been already made, the People join and build Schools for their Children, where they may learn upon very easy Terms [fees].



CHAP. XIII. OF THE LIBERTIES AND NATURALIZATION OF ALIENS IN VIRGINIA.

Christians of all Nations have equal freedom there, and upon their Arrival become Ipso facto entitled to all the Liberties and Privileges of the Country [colony], provided they take the Oaths of Obedience to the Crown and Government [English king and the colonial officials]. . . .

All the French Refugees sent in thither by the Charitable Exhibition of his late Majesty King William are Naturalized.

In the year 1699, there went over in about three hundred of these, and the year following about two hundred more, and so on, till there arrived in all between seven and eight hundred Men, Women, and Children, who had fled from France on account of their Religion [Protestant].

Those who went over the first year were advised to Seat on a piece of very rich Land about twenty Miles above the Falls of James River, on the South side of the River, which Land was formerly the Seat of a Great and Warlike Nation of Indians call'd the Monacàn, none of which are now left in those Parts; but the Land still retains their Name and is call'd the Monacàn Town. . . .



CH. XIV. OF THE CURRENCY AND VALUATION OF COINS IN VIRGINIA.

The Coin which chiefly they have among 'em, is either Gold, of the Stamp of Arabia, or Silver and Gold, of the Stamp of the Spanish America, But they have now very little Money there and are still like to have rather less than more while matters remain in the ill Condition they are. For while they are forbid raising the Coin, and the Neighboring Governments [colonies] all around are allow'd to enhance the rate of it with them to above thirty per Cent more than the Intrinsic Value, all their Money will be carry'd thither [i.e., to other colonies], which seems to be the greatest hardship in the World upon that Colony. It were much to be wish'd that all the Colonies of the Continent under the Dominion of England were oblig'd to have one and the same Standard for their Coin, that so one Government might not suffer by the unreasonable advances of another. The Inconveniences to Virginia by the drawing away all the Specie [money] are inexpressible. For People want Money for traveling Expenses and for paying the small Jobs of Laborers and Artificers [craftsmen] who would otherwise save abundance of time to themselves, which is now lost in looking after trivial Debts, besides the disadvantage of not being able to turn the Penny. By having no Ready-Money, many Law-suits commence to demand those Debts, . . .



PT. II. Of the Husbandry [Farming] and Improvements of Virginia.

CH. XV. OF THE PEOPLE, INHABITANTS OF VIRGINIA.

I can easily imagine with Sir Josiah Child that this, as well as all the rest of the Plantations [colonies], was for the most part at first peopled by Persons of low Circumstances, and by such as were willing to seek their Fortunes in a Foreign Country. Nor was it hardly possible it should be otherwise, for 'tis not likely that any Man of a plentiful Estate [wealth] should voluntarily abandon a happy Certainty to roam after imaginary Advantages in a New World. Besides which uncertainty, he must have propos'd to himself to encounter the infinite Difficulties and Dangers that attend a New Settlement. These Discouragements

were sufficient to terrify any Man that could live easy in England from going to provoke his Fortune in a strange Land.

Those that went over to that Country first were chiefly single Men who had not the Incumbrance of Wives and Children in England; and if they had, they did not expose them to the fatigue and hazard of so long a Voyage until they saw how it should fare with themselves. From hence it came to pass that when they were settled there in a comfortable way of Subsisting a Family, they grew sensible of the Misfortune of wanting Wives, and such as had left Wives in England, sent for them; but the single Men were put to their Shifts. They excepted against [i.e., did not marry] the Indian Women on account of their being Pagans, and for fear they should conspire with those of their own Nation to destroy their Husbands. Under this Difficulty they had no hopes but that the Plenty in which they liv'd might invite Modest Women of small Fortunes to go over thither from England. However, they would not receive any but such as could carry sufficient Certificate of their Modesty and good Behavior. Those if they were but moderately qualified in all other Respects might depend upon Marrying very well in those Days, without any Fortune. Nay, the first Planters were so far from expecting Money with a Woman that 'twas a common thing for them to buy a deserving Wife at the price of 100 Pound and make themselves believe they had a hopeful bargain.

But this way of Peopling the Colony was only at first; for after the advantages of the Climate and the fruitfulness of the Soil were well known, and all the dangers incident to Infant Settlements were over, People of better Condition retir'd [moved] thither with their Families, either to increase the Estates they had before or else to avoid being persecuted for their Principles of Religion, or Government. . . .



CH. XVI. OF THE BUILDINGS IN VIRGINIA.

There are two fine Public Buildings in this Country [colony] which are the most Magnificent of any in America, One of which is the College before spoken of [William and Mary] and the other the Capitol or State-House, as it was formerly call'd, That is, the House for Convention of the General Assembly, for the Setting of the General Court, for the Meeting of the Council, and for keeping of their several Offices.

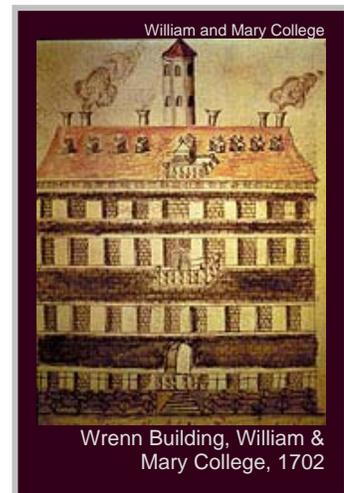
Not far from this is also built the public Prison of the Country, which is a large and convenient Structure, with Partitions for the different Sexes and distinct Rooms for Petty-Offenders. To this is also annexed a convenient Yard to Air the Criminals in, for preservation of their Life and Health, till the time of their Trial.

These are all erected at Middle-Plantation, now nam'd Williamsburgh, where Land is laid out for a new Town. The College and Capitol are both built of Brick and cover'd with Shingle.

The Private Buildings are of late very much improved, several Gentlemen there having built themselves large Brick Houses of many Rooms on a Floor and several Stories high, as also some Stone-Houses; but they don't covet to make them lofty, having extent enough of Ground to build upon; and now and then they are visited by high Winds, which would incommode a towering Fabric. They always contrive to have large Rooms that they may be cool in Summer. Of late they have made their Stories much higher than formerly, and their Windows large and sashed with Crystal Glass, and within they adorn their Apartments with rich Furniture.

All their Drudgeries of Cookery, Washing, Dairies, &c. are perform'd in Offices [buildings] detached from the Dwelling-Houses, which by this means are kept more cool and Sweet.

Their Tobacco-Houses are all built of Wood, as open and airy as is consistent with keeping out the Rain, which sort of Building is most convenient for the curing of their Tobacco. . . .



inclining rather to the first. Certainly it must be a happy Climate since it is very near of the same Latitude with the Land of Promise [Israel]. Besides, As Judea was full of Rivers and Branches of Rivers; So is Virginia, As that was seated upon a great Bay and Sea wherein were all the conveniences for Shipping and Trade; So is Virginia. Had that fertility of Soil? So has Virginia, equal to any Land in the known World. In fine, if any one impartially considers all the Advantages of this Country, as Nature made it, he must allow it to be as fine a Place as any in the Universe; but I confess I am ashamed to say anything of its Improvements, because I must at the same time reproach my Country-Men with a Laziness that is unpardonable. If there be any excuse for them in this Matter, 'tis the exceeding plenty of good things with which Nature has blessed them; for where God Almighty is so Merciful as to work for People, they never work for themselves. . . .

. . . I believe it is as healthy a Country as any under Heaven; but the extraordinary pleasantness of the Weather and the goodness of the Fruit lead People into many Temptations. The clearness and brightness of the Sky add new vigor to their Spirits and perfectly remove all Splenetic and sullen Thoughts. Here they enjoy all the benefits of a warm Sun, and by their shady Groves are protected from its Inconvenience. Here all their Senses are entertain'd with an endless Succession of Native Pleasures. . . .

On the other side, all the Annoyances and Inconveniences of the Country may fairly be summed up under these three Heads: Thunder, Heat, and troublesome Vermin.

I confess, in the hottest part of Summer they have sometimes very loud and surprizing Thunder, but rarely any Damage happens by it. On the country, it is of such advantage to the cooling and refining of the Air that it is oftener wished for than fear'd. But they have no Earthquakes, which the Caribbee [Caribbean] Islands are so much troubled with.

Their Heat is very seldom troublesome, and then only by the accident of a perfect Calm, which happens perhaps two or three times in a year and lasts but a few Hours at a time; and even that Inconvenience is made easy by cool Shades, by open Airy rooms, Summer-Houses, Arbors, and Grottos; But the Spring and Fall afford as pleasant Weather as Mahomet [Muhammed] promis'd in his Paradise. . . .



CH. XX. OF THE DISEASES INCIDENT TO VIRGINIA.

While we are upon the Climate and its Accidents, it will not be improper to mention the Diseases incident to Virginia. Distempers come not there by choking up the Spirits with a foggy and thick Air, as in some Northern Climes, nor by a stifling Heat that exhales the vigor of those that dwell in a more Southerly Latitude, But by a willful and foolish indulging themselves in those Pleasures which in a warm and fruitful Country, Nature lavishes upon Mankind for their Happiness, and not for their Destruction.

Thus I have seen Persons impatient of Heat lie almost naked upon the cold Grass in the Shades and there often forgetting themselves fall asleep. Nay, many are so imprudent as to do this in an Evening and perhaps lie so all Night; when between the Dew from Heaven and the Damps from the Earth, such impressions are made upon the humors of their Body as occasion fatal Distempers.

Thus also have I seen Persons put into a great heat by excessive Action, and in the midst of that Heat, strip off their Clothes and expose their open Pores to the Air. Nay, I have known some mad enough in this hot Condition to take huge drafts of cold Water, or perhaps of Milk and Water, which they esteem much more cold in Operation than Water alone.

And thus likewise have I seen several People (especially New-Comers) so intemperate in devouring the pleasant Fruits that they have fallen into dangerous Fluxes and Surfeits. These, and such like Disorders are the chief occasions [causes] of their Diseases. . . .



CH. XXII. OF THE NATURAL PRODUCT OF VIRGINIA, AND THE ADVANTAGES OF THEIR HUSBANDRY.

The extreme fruitfulness of that Country has been sufficiently shown in the Second Book, and I think we may justly add, that in that particularly it is not exceeded by any other. No Seed is Sowed there but it thrives, and most Plants are improved by being Transplanted thither. And yet there's very little Improvement made among them, nor anything us'd in Traffique [trade], but Tobacco. . . .

. . . they depend altogether upon the Liberality of Nature, without endeavoring to improve its Gifts by Art or Industry. They sponge upon the Blessings of a warm Sun and a fruitful Soil, and almost begrudge the Pains of gathering in the Bounties of the Earth. I should be asham'd to publish this slothful Indolence of my Countrymen, but that I hope it will rouse them out of their Lethargy and excite them to make the most of all those happy Advantages which Nature has given them; and if it does this, I am sure they will have the Goodness to forgive me.

F I N I S.

