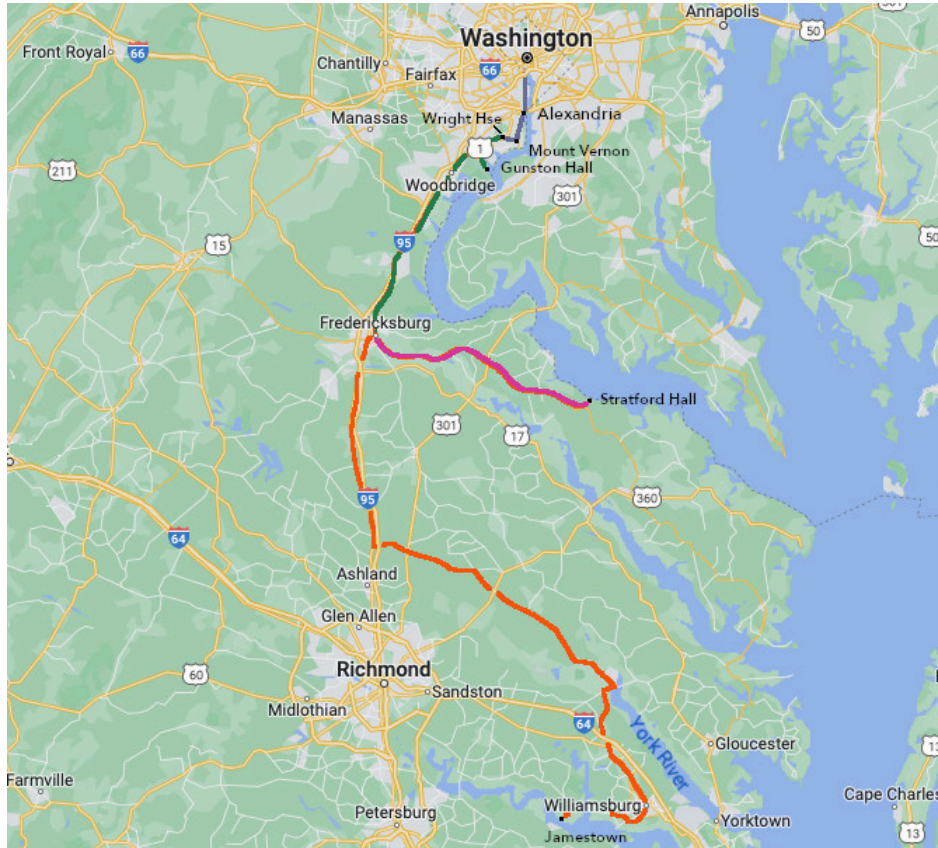


2 – VIRGINIA



— 5 & 6 May; — 7 May; — 8 May; — 9 May.

Friday, 5 May

The journey to Mount Vernon went quickly and I found the car very easy to drive; I noticed that the reading on the rev counter was quite low even when driving at high speed, though for most of the journey I took my time as we were in no hurry.

As we arrived at about 1 p.m., we decided to have lunch in the café before visiting the house. Fortunately only a short queue had formed at the entrance to the house by the time we had finished our meal. About twenty-five of us were admitted and shown around the various rooms by different guides. Built originally in the Palladian style around 1734 by George Washington's father Augustine, and expanded in the 1750s and 1770s, it was quite a handsome building. The main two-storeyed dining room was very elegant and contained a fine fireplace, and the other downstairs rooms were of very good quality. A second and simpler dining room was painted a rather garish shade of green which, we were told, would have been quite acceptable during the eighteenth century. We were also shown Washington's simply-furnished study (which incorporated a combined bathroom,

dressing room and office), the West Parlour, the Front Parlour, and the kitchen. I was delighted to have seen this famous house at long last.



Mount Vernon, Virginia

We left via the kitchen and pantry, and outside I spoke to a group of young people, for I had noticed a girl wearing a tee shirt bearing the words 'Dublin 1950' and a shamrock. We then looked inside some interesting outbuildings nearby, then walked around the back of the house, where we admired the view of the mighty Potomac River. From here we made our way down to the wharf, where we were lucky to catch the three o'clock boat. For \$9 we were brought out for a short round trip to see the house and the surrounding scenery from the river. When all the young people had tired of looking at the views and listening to the guide's commentary on everything, they applied themselves to drinks and popcorn from the on-board café below deck.



The sixteen-sided barn in the grounds of Mount Vernon, Virginia

When we returned, we walked through a vegetable garden and stopped to admire an unusual sixteen-sided barn. A young lady, dressed in period costume,

explained the building to us. Chatting with her, we discovered that she had done a course of Irish studies in Belfast.

We then walked along a delightful forest pathway, which led us past some farmland, then returned to the complex where we had eaten lunch. We went into the gift shop, where I bought the official guide book for the house, some postcards and a couple of presents for friends.

We then left and went off in search of accommodation. We drove all the way back to Alexandria (which we had passed this morning) in order to try Duke Street. However, we only succeeded in getting badly stuck in very heavy rush-hour traffic. We only found one hotel, which was full up and far too expensive. We turned around and drove back to Mount Vernon. Having found nothing on our way, we drove on until we approached Route 1. We stopped at a shop and inside I asked a lady for help. She recommended that we turn right, heading back towards Alexandria where, she said, we would find a variety of motels.

We followed her advice and – lo and behold! – found an Econo Lodge immediately. They had a room at \$40 each and, as we were quite happy with it, we decided to stay here. It was quite comfortable and very clean.

Once we had relaxed after our journey, we had showers. Later we walked to a nearby fast-food restaurant, where we had chicken, Caesar salad and ‘biscuit’ (a type of bread). Afterwards we ambled back to our motel, where I bought some fruit, which we then ate in our room. Later I wrote my diary and finally went to bed. Apart from the panic caused by trying to find accommodation this evening, it had been a very pleasant and interesting day. I was delighted that I was feeling well once again after our short stay in Washington DC.

Saturday, 6 May

Neither of us had slept much during the night thanks to a prolonged fit of coughing that I had suffered during the night. We rose at about eight o’clock; about an hour later we drove along Route 1 towards Alexandria and found a restaurant where we could have a decent breakfast, for the food on offer in the motel was rather poor. I ate three pancakes with strawberries and maple syrup; Colm had the same after he had demolished a huge bowl of oatmeal porridge.



Woodlawn House, Woodlawn Plantation, Virginia

Refreshed, we returned to the motel, where we collected our belongings, and walked across the road to the Woodlawn Plantation, not knowing what exactly we would find there. All we knew was that it housed Frank Lloyd Wright's famous Pope-Leighey house. We walked along a lovely avenue through a forest (where we saw a woodchuck running across the path) and found ourselves at a fine Georgian house in which George Washington's wife's granddaughter, Nellie Curtis, had once lived.

After I had taken a couple of photos, we went inside and bought tickets for the house and also for Wright's house nearby. The two of us and a young American lady were then escorted through the magnificent rooms by a very well-informed guide named John. He had a good sense of humour, was delighted to discover that we were all genuinely interested in everything. He was also pleased to learn that we were Irish and that we knew something about early keyboard instruments. He gave us a very comprehensive introduction to the house and sketched such a graphic picture of life at the time that I found this tour far more satisfying than the one in Mount Vernon on the previous day. Apart from learning everything about the various rooms and their furnishings, we were informed about how the Curtis family had lived, what they used to do in the house (such as eating and dancing in the hall during the summer with the front and back doors open), and how the Black slaves had been treated. All in all, it was a fascinating glimpse into life as it had once been in the past. We were interested to find a square piano in the music room. Upstairs, the linen room at the back of the house overlooked a fine panoramic view of forest with a glimpse of the Potomac River and a clump of trees near Mount Vernon. There was a wonderful feeling of space in the house.



The Pope-Leighey house, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, Woodlawn Plantation

The tour took a little over an hour; after we had drunk some water, bought a couple of postcards and spoken to a couple of ladies in the shop, we left and wished the guide goodbye. We then walked with the American lady to Wright's Pope-Leighey house. Some other visitors joined us and once again we had another very comprehensive introduction to this quite unusual and interesting wooden house built in 1940. The house, which is small and comfortable, is very Japanese in concept; however, we detected a few Scandinavian features as well. It was very cleverly designed, both inside and outside, and every inch of space was used

sensibly. Although built for people of moderate means, it must have been a wonderfully restful place to live in.

As before, we emerged after an hour and, feeling tired and hungry by now, we footed it back to a nearby 7-Eleven shop, where we bought sandwiches and fruit for our lunch. We ate this in our room and then, despite the noise of workmen outside, had a nap.



Carlyle House and a church in Alexandria, Virginia

Refreshed, we set off in the car along Route 1 to Alexandria, where we managed to leave the car in a public car park. We walked to a nearby information centre and asked for directions to the Catholic church. Before going there, we had a quick look at the exterior of Carlyle House. Although quite beautiful, it was obvious that it had been altered at some period in the past. We stopped again to look at some more of the landmarks, and admired some of the excellent local architecture as we walked towards the church. The Mass lasted a good hour; numerous hymns were sung and babies cried.

Afterwards we looked around a little more, then made our way to the historic Gadsby's Tavern where, in a dining room lit by candles and served by a waitress dressed in period costume, we ate food based on recipes that had been used in the eighteenth century. The starter consisted of peanut soup, and my main dish was 'George Washington's Favorite': duckling in an unusual sauce, creamed potato, red cabbage and something that I simply could not identify. I washed this down with a small bottle of ale that had been produced in Pennsylvania, in America's oldest brewery. We finished with a dessert called 'Berry Heaven': blueberries and some other variety of berry served on top of a coffee-flavoured mousse. Although it was an excellent meal, my meat was a little undercooked. The bill came to a little less than \$80 for the two of us.

We eventually left, walked around by Christ Church, where George Washington had worshipped, and then, having passed various lovely old houses and sophisticated shops, we made our way back to the car park. As dusk had fallen by now, I had the novel experience of driving back to the motel in the dark. This time we took the road via Mount Vernon as we were more familiar with it.

Back at the Econo Lodge, I transferred my latest photos to my iPod and, when I started to view them, I discovered that the other photographs that I had taken so far had mysteriously disappeared. I could not understand why or how this had

happened. After taking a shower and washing some clothes, I wrote my diary until bedtime.

Sunday, 7 May

Having slept very well and not having woken with a fit of coughing, I felt much better this morning. We rose at about eight o'clock, drove to the nearby restaurant, and breakfasted on porridge and pancakes. We then returned to our motel, checked out, and set off along Route 1 in search of Gunston Hall. After travelling a short distance, we began to see signposts for this historic house, though the actual entrance, on the left, was difficult to see from the road. When I suddenly realized that we had reached it, I had to indicate, for there was traffic behind us and a car coming in the opposite direction. I made a dash for it, narrowly avoiding a collision with the car that was approaching us. Needless to say, the driver gave us a loud blast of his horn!



Gunston Hall, Virginia

We arrived shortly after 10.30 and found the place practically deserted. We bought our admission tickets from a nice lady who directed us to a little cinema, where we watched a ten-minute film about the house. We discovered that the fine eighteenth-century Georgian mansion that we were about to visit had once been the home of George Mason, one of the Founding Fathers who united the Thirteen Colonies, oversaw the War of Independence from Great Britain, established the United States, and created a framework of government for the new nation.

We then ambled past some of the exhibits in the welcome centre and finally emerged at the approach to the house. As it had been very well restored, it looked almost brand new. At the entrance, we joined a lady with two young boys and, at eleven o'clock sharp, a man appeared and welcomed us. After a general introduction (which certainly bored the two boys), we were admitted and shown around the fine house. Although the décor was interesting, some of the walls had not been wallpapered.

There was a fine view of the grounds and the Potomac river from the back of the house and the bedrooms upstairs were simple and cosy. As in Mount Vernon, a horribly bright green paint had been used in one of the rooms. We were told that the place had once been a hive of activity, with a staff of some ninety slaves. Now it

was blissfully peaceful. From the windows we were able to see some of the many outhouses. After the tour we wandered down through the garden at the back and sat on a seat overlooking a large forest and, in the distance, the Potomac river. It was delightfully pleasant here.



The grounds of Gunston Hall, Virginia

Having rested for a while and listened to a bird singing, we walked down through a clearing in the forest, turned back and had a look in the gift shop. I bought some postcards and a fine big book about the plantation houses in the region.

Tired and hungry by now – it was past two o'clock – we set off southwards along Route 1 and finally stopped at a Mexican restaurant, where we had a meal that I found quite disgusting. Refreshed a little, we resumed our journey and drove down to Fredericksburg, stopping at a place called Dunning Mills Inn: a number of buildings containing suites of rooms. We got one of these for \$87, including tax; our suite consisted of a twin room with an en-suite bathroom and a kitchen. As it was well back from the road, it was very quiet.

As we were both tired by now, we rested, then set off in the rain for the old town centre of Fredericksburg which, although small, was quite charming. We ambled up and down the streets for a while, looking at shops, then finally went into a restaurant that included a bar, where we had an excellent meal of soup, vegetable lasagne, then apple crisp with ice cream for me and pecan pie for Colm. I drank a large glass of Stella Artois beer.

We finally left and found our way back to the inn with some difficulty owing to the darkness, the rain, and a proliferation of confusing signs along the road. We relaxed and went to bed some time later.

Monday, 8 May

A dull, wet morning. We took our time about getting up and leaving; at one point I went over to the office and booked for another night. When driving into the town centre to get breakfast, we took a wrong turn and got lost. We doubled back and finally arrived in the town centre just before ten o'clock, only to discover that the only place that served a decent breakfast was closed. Having tried another restaurant, which had nothing that was appetizing on offer, we decided to skip

breakfast and leave. The fellow who ran the first place that we had tried, and who now was outside smoking a cigarette, spoke to us and gave us directions on how to get out of the town. We followed them and found ourselves in an industrial estate that contained several shops. I stopped the car at a barber's shop and asked for directions. We went back a little, turned right and followed the road, which eventually brought us back into the old town centre! We cursed the fellow at the restaurant.

When we had worked out the correct way to go (I consulted a map), we headed off for Stratford Hall, the plantation house lived in for four generations by the famous Lee family of Virginia. This was situated on the Northern Neck section of Virginia, in Westmoreland County. We drove for some considerable distance along Route 3 and eventually reached the estate. An elderly man came out of a little hut and sold us entrance tickets: \$10 for me and \$9 for Colm as he was over 60.



Stratford Hall, Virginia

At the welcome centre a lady told us which way to go and we looked at a small exhibition before walking towards the rather severe-looking house with unusually high chimneys. At the entrance we were greeted by two women dressed as eighteenth-century servants, and shown around the building with some other tourists. Although the place was interesting, it contained almost no furniture of its own. The most impressive room was the twenty-nine-foot square hall; most of the rooms were very plain and filled with contemporary furniture. Nevertheless, Colm and I agreed that it had been worth making the journey to see this historic house, which had been the boyhood home of two Founding Fathers of the United States and signers of the Declaration of Independence: Richard Henry Lee (1732–94) and Francis Lightfoot Lee (1734–97).

As we were tired and hungry after our visit, I persuaded Colm to eat something in the property's 'dining room'. Colm wanted to eat a decent lunch in the nearby village, but also wanted to take a walk around the grounds here, especially as it had stopped raining by now. Although disappointed that the café only offered soup, sandwiches and salads, he decided to fall in with my plan. We ordered bowls of black bean soup (which I did not care for much) and then were presented with two small toasted sandwiches made with white bread. As the coleslaw had been used

up, we had to make do with apple sauce as a 'salad'. The food was very inadequate relative to its price.

We then left and set off on a good and pleasant walk down to the Potomac River; at one point we gazed down at some steep cliffs and at another we stood by the murky water's edge. We then tramped through the forest in a big semicircle and finally returned to the house feeling tired but delighted to have had some exercise. Colm had enjoyed the walk and was glad that I had persuaded him to stay in the grounds and have lunch in the café.

Colm now took the wheel of the car and we left. On our way back to Fredericksburg we turned off the main road and visited the George Washington Birthplace Memorial. This consisted of a scaled-down version of the obelisk in Washington DC, a welcome centre, and a collection of buildings that included a reconstructed house of the period, which we managed to see very quickly before it was closed to the public. It was a very tasteful building. We then looked at the outline of the original house in which Washington had been born, and stepped inside it. Before we left, we had a look at the Washington family tomb nearby.

Afterwards we drove back to Fredericksburg. We parked the car just before six o'clock in the town centre and went looking for food. We ended up in the same restaurant in which we had eaten on the previous evening, and I had a good dinner of fish chowder, a main course of chicken and pasta, and finally pecan pie with ice cream for dessert. We returned to our accommodation without incident and spent the rest of the evening relaxing. I felt a good deal more comfortable after taking a shower and washing my hair.

Tuesday, 9 May

As we had both gone to bed early the previous night and had slept well, we had no trouble rising before seven o'clock. When ready, we set off and were in the town centre (no mistakes this time!) by half past seven. We made our way to the little restaurant where we had intended to have breakfast and discovered that it would not open until eight o'clock. We therefore ambled around a part of the town that we had not seen before and returned to the restaurant, but we were not allowed in until quarter past eight. The food was excellent: I had a cooked breakfast that included orange juice, porridge, and tea.

When finished, we returned to our motel, where we washed our teeth, checked out and left. We were on the road by about ten o'clock, and drove southwards along Route 1. The shops, motels and restaurants disappeared and we found ourselves driving along a pleasant country road. In order to avoid Richmond (the capital of Virginia), we took Route 30: an even nicer road that brought us through some fine scenery. We could detect a wonderfully laid-back feel about the place.

A series of other roads brought us down to Route 60; as we approached Williamsburg, we began to look out for accommodation. Spotting another Econo Lodge, we stopped at it, and the man at the desk gave us a room for two nights for \$76. We were ensconced in a room that looked similar to the one we had been in three days previously. After we had relaxed, we walked to the nearby Red Lobster restaurant, where we had an excellent lunch of fish and salad.

We returned to our room afterwards, where we had a snooze, then set off for Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement in North America, established on 14 May, 1607. We found the place difficult to get to because of poor signposting and roads not appearing where we were expecting to find them. At last we reached what was called Jamestown Settlement but ran out of it when we discovered how staged it all was. Instead we headed for 'Historical Jamestowne' on Jamestown

Island, where the original settlement, founded by Captain John Smith (1580–1631) and others, had been. It cost us \$8 to enter this area. Although there was very little to see, there was a delightfully peaceful atmosphere about the place as there were so few people around. I was delighted to set foot in this historic corner of the New World at long last. By now the weather was fine and the view over the James River was very pleasant indeed.



Jamestown Island, Virginia, and a statue of Captain John Smith

After we had looked around, we wandered back to the car and set off on a gentle drive around the island, which was delightful. At the opposite end we walked to a tiny beach. On leaving the island we stopped at the Old Glass House, where glass had once been manufactured. We then drove along the beautiful Colonial Parkway to Williamsburg, where we parked the car close to the large visitor centre and walked into the nearby historic district known as Colonial Williamsburg. Although we did not see too much, it was delightful to stroll around and feast our eyes on the beautiful old buildings at this time of the day, when it was quiet. We wondered what it would be like on the following day, as we planned to spend the morning and afternoon here. We went into a shop, where I bought a book about Thomas Jefferson that I had been planning to buy.

We left via the Governor's Palace (an elegant mansion), bought tickets at the visitor centre for the following day's admission as there were so few people about, then set off for our motel. On the way we stopped at an Italian restaurant, where we enjoyed an excellent meal of soup, salad, then a dish of chicken and veal with spaghetti. I drank a glass of white wine and we finished with refreshing iced tea. We then returned to the motel, tired but pleased with what we had seen today.