

3 – VIRGINIA: WILLIAMSBURG TO THE APPALACHIANS

Wednesday, 10 May

Having slept well, we rose at about seven o'clock. We breakfasted on porridge in a restaurant across the road from the motel, where we were served by a young lady from Romania. We set off before nine o'clock and ten minutes later were at the visitor centre, boarding one of the buses bound for Colonial Williamsburg. We hopped off at a stop near a windmill and made straight for the elegant and rather Dutch-looking Governor's Palace. We were one of the first to go in for a conducted tour, which a fair amount of people joined.



The Governor's Palace, Williamstown, Virginia

Inside, the guide did a very thorough job of explaining everything to us while escorting us through a number of elegant rooms. We were told that the building had been completely reconstructed; the work had certainly been very well done. The dark hallway contained a collection of guns of various different types. We saw

keyboard musical instruments in some of the rooms: a small square piano, a harpsichord, and a couple of organs, one of which was cleverly disguised as a bureau. The room containing the harpsichord was particularly fine, and the walls, which had been painted blue, had four large paintings hanging on them.

Leaving from the back door, we went out and admired the formal gardens. At the bottom of the garden was a man dressed as Patrick Henry, a prominent figure in eighteenth-century America; he was giving quite an animated speech to anyone who was willing to stop and listen to him.



The gardens of the Governor's Palace, and a man dressed as Patrick Henry, Williamstown

After we had looked around the gardens, we left, wandered down Palace Green and visited the Wythe House. While sitting on a bench, waiting for a guided tour, we spoke to a woman who was dressed in period costume and who had a pronounced southern drawl. The Wythe House is considered unique in that it contains most of its original features, including the glass in the windows. It is a simple brick structure containing plain, though elegant rooms.

We then walked to the nearby Bruton parish church, which we discovered was closed because of a communion service. We had a quick look at the graveyard and then headed down towards the Courthouse, having decided to return to the church at midday for a ten-minute prayer service. En route we popped into an information and ticket office to enquire about Semple House, which I had read about in

Desmond Guinness's book *Palladio: A Western Progress*. The lady in the office had not heard of it and handed me a guide book so that I could check the index. I managed to locate the historic building once I had discovered that it was now called the William Finnie House.



The Courthouse, Williamsburg, Virginia

At the Courthouse we joined a large group that was about to be taken on a tour of it; in fact, the 'tour' turned out to be a mock court case involving members of the group taking the parts of jurors and defendants. Although it was a rather long rigmarole, parts of which Colm and I could not follow, it was quite funny at times. An English man, who was sitting beside me, had to pretend that he was an American and defend himself regarding the use of tea which, back in 1773, had been outlawed in America as a means of avoiding paying tax to the British East India Company, and therefore to the British government in England. Afterwards, a young lady dressed in period costume tried to defend herself for having written a letter to her mother in which she had divulged information about certain military matters.



Randolph House, Williamstown, Virginia

Unfortunately the court cases did not finish until midday and so, by the time we had raced back to the church, the prayer service had started and we were not allowed in. Instead, we wandered over to the Randolph House and Kitchen: a simple wooden structure containing plain rooms and a covered walkway to the kitchen. Here a woman, who had what sounded like an English accent and who was dressed as a cook, explained how she prepared meals for the family.

Afterwards we wandered down to the post office, where Colm sent off some postcards. We then found a seat nearby, where we sat down and ate a simple lunch of sandwiches and a banana that we had bought this morning on our way here.



The Capitol, Williamsburg, Virginia

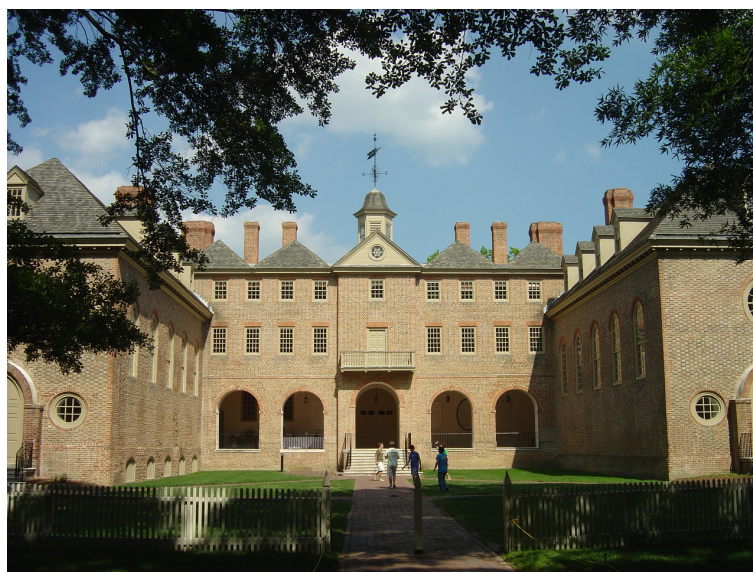
Having relaxed for a while, we then ambled down Duke of Gloucester Street to the large and impressive Capitol. Here we joined a large group and were brought into this fine reconstructed building, where we were shown around the various court and state rooms. Becoming sleepy by now and somewhat overwhelmed by so much American history, I dozed off at one stage.



The William Finnie House, Williamsburg, Virginia

We left at the end of the tour, just as some actors had started to read out the historic Declaration of Independence over loudspeakers, and crossed over to the William Finnie House, which we found was closed to the public. Although it was made of wood and was quite small, it was built in true Palladian style. We got chatting to a friendly security man who told us all about the house but made no effort to invite us inside.

We now returned by Francis Street and the main street to the Bruton Parish Church, which we were able to see inside at last. A man was busy tuning a new harpsichord that had arrived on the previous day; unfortunately we had no chance of speaking to him. I chatted to a lady who told me about the church organ, the pipes of which could be seen over the altar, behind the gallery and were also up in the attic. The interior of the church was very fine; a handsome chandelier, Dutch in style, hung from the ceiling.



The Wren building, William and Mary University, Williamsburg, Virginia

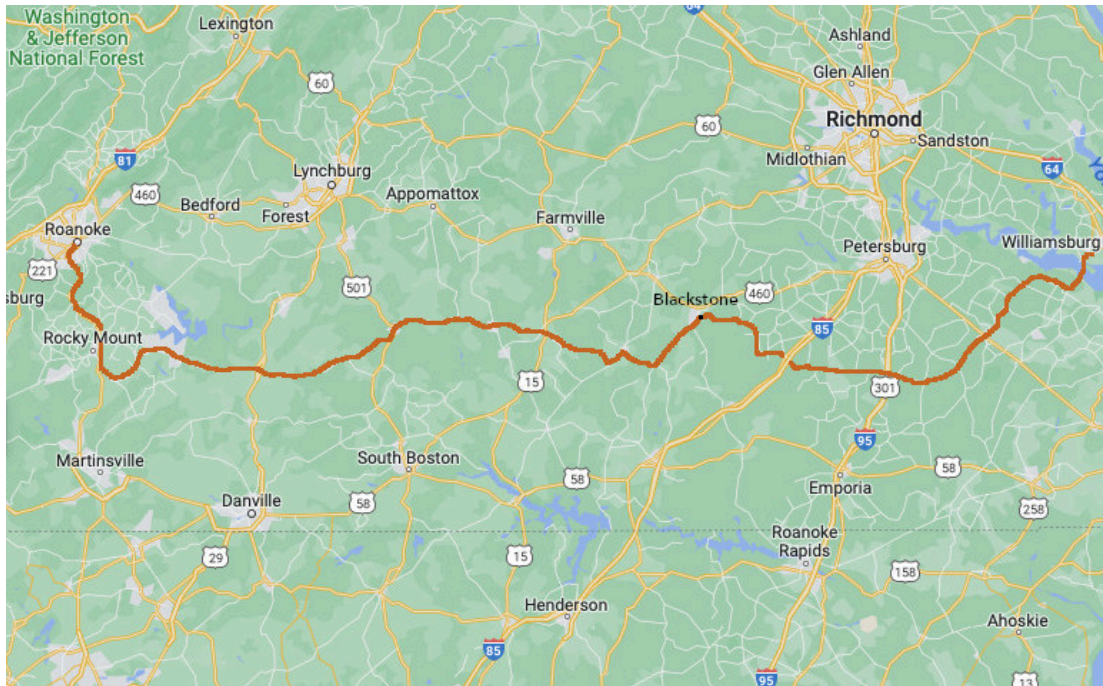
We rested here for a while, then made our way down to the final place on our itinerary: the so-called ‘Wren’ building of the very old William and Mary University. This turned out to be a very large and impressive structure; we were able to admire just a few of the many rooms inside.

After all this we finally collapsed into a nearby café, where we drank tea and ate some cookies. Although we were exhausted, we agreed that the day had gone extremely well and that we had found everything very interesting; initially we had been worried that the town might prove to be too touristy and gimmicky for our liking. We had deliberately avoided the afternoon’s dramatic re-enactments of various historical events and were glad that we had done so, for we had had our bellyful of colonial American history!

We then wandered into a few very good shops (I bought a nice book on Williamsburg décor in one of them), tried to use an ATM that was temporarily out of order, and finally found our way back to the visitor centre. By now I was delighted to sit inside our comfortable car and drive back to our motel.

After resting we took showers, then went to the Red Lobster restaurant next door, where we had an excellent dinner of fish. We started with warm ‘biscuit’ and salad; for the main course I had flounder and catfish served with baked potato and soured cream, which I washed down with a glass of white wine.

Back in the motel I then spent the rest of the evening bringing my diary up to date.



Thursday, 11 May

A rather grey and overcast morning. Up at about seven o'clock and out to the same restaurant for breakfast; this morning I started with porridge, followed by a malted waffle with pecan nuts. During our meal we chatted to the young Romanian lady again and then to a man who was either her partner or husband.

When ready, we checked out of the motel, went into a nearby bank to change money, then set off for Historic Jamestown, where we popped into the bookstore and bought books on the early records of the settlement. I bought a book that I had seen previously and Colm bought a bigger and better volume for his sister's fiancé.

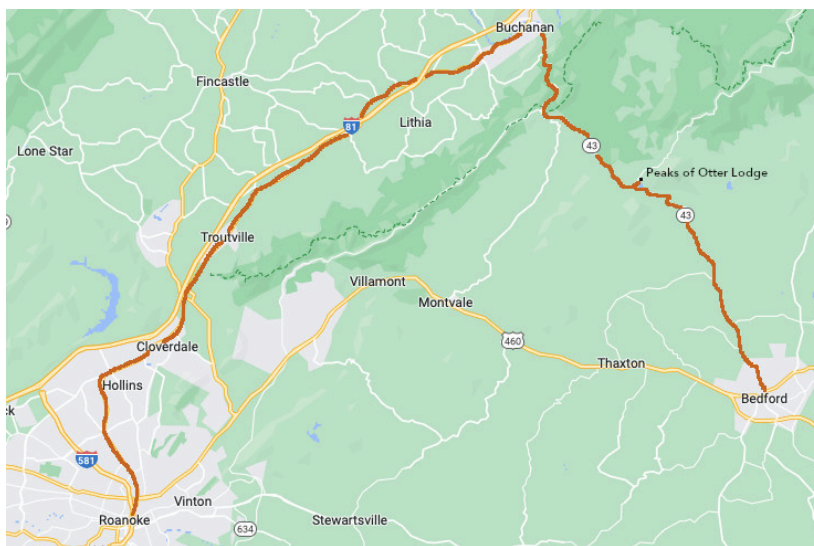
We then drove to a ferry, which was free of charge, and crossed the James River to a little village named Scotland. From here we found our way to Route 40, which we spent the rest of the day following. It brought us through some pleasant though unremarkable terrain: a sort of Virginian no man's land with no accommodation on offer. As the weather rapidly deteriorated and it began to rain intermittently (at one stage it was very heavy), it was an ideal day to venture on such a long and wearisome journey.

We stopped in the little town of Blackstone for a fairly good lunch and managed to stretch our legs. Seeing cars for sale outside a showroom, we went to have a look at them and got talking to a salesman. He told us that the model of Buick that we were driving would cost about \$27,000 to buy – astonishingly cheap by Irish standards. The salesman was amazed to discover that a gallon of gasoline (petrol) cost about \$5 at home in Ireland, which was very expensive by American standards.

We set off again and continued our long journey to the Appalachian Mountains, taking it in turns to drive. As we still were unable to find accommodation anywhere, we decided to head for Roanoke. As the few motels that we saw there were beside very busy roads and did not look at all inviting, we ended up in the centre of the city. Despite having been told by a local that there were hotels nearby, we saw none. When we turned off the main street, we stopped at a petrol station

and a man gave us directions to a nearby motel. We ended up at Days Inn, a large place run by an Indian couple who had once lived in London. The lady was very kind to us and reduced her husband's price of \$79 to \$65. Our room was basic, though comfortable.

Exhausted by now, I had a shower and then we went to the motel restaurant, where we had a spaghetti Bolognese served with garlic bread and salad. For dessert we were given a slice of very sweet coconut cake. Having picked up some brochures, we then returned to our room for a good night's sleep.



Friday, 12 May

This morning we woke early (at about seven o'clock), had a basic breakfast of porridge, pancakes and tea, then set off immediately. By heading north-eastwards and taking Route 11 we managed to escape from the city and drive through some fine countryside towards some lush, wooded mountains. When we reached Buchanan, we turned right and set off along Route 43. Passing through forest and between the mountains, we reached a junction of the Blue Ridge Parkway and stopped at a visitor centre, where we were able to get some information about the area. We then continued along Route 43 to the Peaks of Otter Lodge, which was located by the side of a beautiful lake facing Sharp Top Mountain (conical in shape), and succeeded in booking a room for three consecutive nights. However, as the room was being cleaned, we could not gain access to it until the afternoon.



Peaks of Otter Lodge, Virginia

We therefore left, drove to the foot of Sharp Top Mountain, and began the 1½-mile ascent by a not particularly difficult path. As we took it at an easy pace, it was not a strenuous uphill climb. We finally reached the rocky summit and were rewarded with breathtaking views of the surrounding mountains and countryside. As we were up quite high – a little over 3,000 feet – we were able to enjoy a wide panoramic view and look off into the distance. It had been a bright and sunny morning but now it had turned a little cloudy; as a result, dappled light illuminated the magical landscape. It was blissfully quiet up here; as nobody was about, all we could hear was birdsong.



The view from the summit of Sharp Top Mountain, Virginia

Having lingered here for a while, we descended the mountain and were soon back at our car. Hungry by now, we drove back to the hotel for some lunch at a little before 1.30 p.m. but, as the dining room was packed, we were asked to wait for about thirty minutes. I looked in the gift shop and then sat down with Colm to study a map until we were called and shown to our table. After we had ordered what we wanted to eat, we noticed that the service was extremely slow, and that a waitress who was serving food seemed to be completely confused as to what table she should bring it to.

After we had waited an hour and had still not received our starter, we left and told the lady who had brought us into the dining room to cancel our lunch. We then brought our luggage to our room. When ready, we left in the car and drove to a nearby village, where we put some more oil in the car and bought sandwiches in the garage shop. After we had eaten this very light and late lunch, we returned to the visitor centre and set off on a three-mile walk to Harkening Hill and back. As this was mostly through forest, we saw little of the scenery, but it was very pleasant. We eventually returned to the car at about 6.30 p.m. and set off along the same road until we arrived at Bedford where, after some searching, we managed to find a Chinese restaurant. We had a buffet meal consisting of some rather indifferent dishes that filled rather than satisfied us. We finished with an unusual dessert called 'fried ice cream'.

Afterwards we searched and found the local Catholic church, then returned to the hotel. We now took a short walk by the beautiful lake and made our way to our room, where I wrote my diary and a couple of postcards. Apart from the lack of a proper lunch, it had been a delightful day, for it had been an excellent opportunity to abandon the car and take some much-needed exercise. We both felt better for it.

Saturday, 13 May

It was a fine sunny morning when we woke today. Thanks to the previous day's activity, both of us had slept exceptionally well. The water in the lake outside was so still that it acted as a mirror, reflecting Sharp Top mountain and the nearby trees. When ready, we made our way to the dining room, where we had an excellent buffet breakfast that included bowls of oatmeal porridge.



The view of Sharp Top Mountain from the Peaks of Otter Lodge, Virginia

At 9.30 we set off to climb the nearby Flat Top mountain, which could be reached by walking directly from the hotel. Although the path was an easy one, it proved to be very tiring as it was a constant, though gradual, uphill climb. We stopped once at some rocks for a rest and admired a terrific view of the surrounding countryside before finally reaching the top. From one side of the summit we had a breathtaking view of the plains extending eastwards from the mountains. We stayed here until midday and then made our way back to the hotel, where we tucked into an excellent lunch which, presumably, we should have been able to eat on the previous day if the service had been up to scratch. We both consumed large portions of turkey.



A view from Flat Top Mountain, Virginia

Afterwards we returned to our room, where I fell asleep for three quarters of an hour. I woke up feeling rather dazed and a little later we went out to walk the Johnson Farm loop, which once again could be reached directly from the hotel grounds. Fortunately this was a shorter and less strenuous route than this morning's climb. Johnson's Farm turned out to be a restored wooden house, painted white, together with a couple of outbuildings and some old farming equipment.

Back at the hotel we had a pleasant walk right around the lake and returned to our room, where I had a quick shower. We then drove to Bedford, where we attended the 5.30 p.m. Mass in a pleasant modern church. Although it lasted an hour, the priest was good and quite entertaining. We then drove to the Chinese restaurant, where we dined on rice, shrimp and vegetables. Afterwards I had the fried banana dessert.

We then returned to our hotel, where we spent the rest of the evening. It had been another excellent day.

Sunday, 14 May

Once again I slept like a log and did not wake until about 7.45 a.m. After Colm and I had enjoyed another excellent breakfast from the buffet, we set off in the car at 9.30. Although the weather forecast had been for heavy rain, it was dry and just a little cloudy. We drove to the car park at the start of the Falling Water Cascades Trail, which was not far from the hotel, donned shoes and rain gear just in case, and followed the forest walk to the not particularly impressive waterfall. It did not take us long to complete this trail. By the time we returned to the car we were hot and bothered, for the sun had been shining, and so we threw off our jumpers and jackets.

We then drove up the road to the Flat Top mountain parking area and started off once again, this time approaching the peak from the opposite side, which meant following a winding path. Because I was now starting to run out of energy and my left leg was beginning to hurt (I had woken with stiff muscles this morning), I did not make it to the top. I sat down for a while, then returned to the car park at my own speed. As there was nobody around – we had only met one person this morning: a lady with binoculars – it was a delightful experience to walk through the forest on my own, listening to the birdsong and observing all the flora and fauna. I came across several large millipedes, a deer, and a couple of unusual birds. One of them had very striking black-and-white markings, with a bright red area on the chest. I later discovered that this was a rose-beaked grosbeak.



Trillium, Flat Top Mountain

I had only been sitting in the car for about ten minutes when Colm appeared and joined me. The moment he sat down and shut the door, the rain started; by the time we reached the hotel, it was pouring. We raced to the lobby and joined a large crowd waiting for lunch, even though it was 2.30 p.m. by now. Fortunately we did not have to wait too long before being called and escorted in. Today we were able to select what we wanted from an extensive buffet; both of us stuffed ourselves as we were so hungry after all the walking.

Later we returned to our room. Colm endeavoured to telephone home, but without success; the operator at the other end of the public phone was not authorized to accept his credit card and there was no signal on my little mobile phone. All we could do now was relax, sleep and read for the rest of the afternoon.

Colm made an attempt to go out for a walk later, but had to return immediately because of more rain. I managed to get over to the hotel lobby in order to send off a postcard, then realized that I was stuck there because of another heavy shower. I read some of my guide book in the TV room downstairs until the rain eased off, then ran back to our room and wrote my diary.

Later in the evening we managed to take a stroll around the lake before having a light supper in the dining room: soup followed by a fruit salad. We then took another quick walk before retiring to our room. We had enjoyed our three days in this enchanted spot; the only disadvantage was the large number of people staying in the hotel.