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Writer takes critical look at Virginia's past, present

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Books of local history can be tricky propositions. For a writer, it is just as easy to delve deeply and richly into the cultural underpinnings of a small corner of the country, fleshing out the unknown figures and forgotten places, as it is to alienate readers in a singular fascination with the boring, arcane minutiae of a town's or village's past.

It becomes noteworthy, then, that Susan Dunn turns a focused gaze to the deterioration of the dominance of Virginia and explores it on a decidedly national scale. "Dominion of Memories: Jefferson, Madison & the Decline of Virginia" is a slim and highly readable volume that investigates how the state that produced four of the first five presidents and was the foremost commonwealth in the nation could, in less than a century, become the dying vestige of an imagined agrarian South.

For such an excoriating piece of writing, "Dominion of Memories" is satisfyingly levelheaded. Dunn does nothing less than lock horns with hypocrisies of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, reproachful of their inconsistencies as the fodder by which rich, white landowners turned Virginia into a slaveholding oligarchy.

Despite her smartly academic tone - Dunn is a professor of humanities at Williams College - and clean, accessible prose, there is no mistaking that Dunn intends attack: Even before the title appears, the book's first page contains a disturbing photograph of Monticello, abandoned and decrepit, windows broken, fences rotting, trees skeletal, soil dry and rocky. A feeling of trepidation comes with the prologue, as it becomes abundantly clear that Dunn's perception of Virginia's past is neither a tranquil nor an admiring one.

For the men who guided Virginia's government through the mid-19th century, "loyally following Jefferson and Madison's lead, inspired by the principled, if mistaken, stands the great founders had taken," the future of Virginia was to be a glorious extension of the Southern agrarian vision: "(they) preferred the plantation idyll of gracious living, elegant manners, and warm hospitality to the dull depersonalization and cacophonous din of industrialized society."

On topics as broad as education, transportation and infrastructure, tariffs, banks, agriculture and slavery, the followers of Madison and Jefferson would misshape the founders' beliefs. Followers turned from the unavoidable and irrefutably sound federal and industrial developments of the Northern and, in some cases, Western states, standing firmly within a shrinking concept of the South as land of serene plantations and slaves working heartily for their masters' wealth.

Toward the close of Dunn's thesis, she begins to draw the compounding errors of Virginia's past and into the 20th century. The insurrectionary cries of Sen. Harry Byrd and Gov. Tom Stanley in the face of Roosevelt's New Deal and the civil rights movement, respectively, become sad extensions of John Calhoun and John Tyler railing against federal programs to create interstate roads or trying to prevent postmasters general from allowing abolitionist pamphlets into Southern mailboxes.

Indeed, Virginia leaders' calls to publish names of Americans distributing such anti-slavery propaganda becomes eerily

prescient versions of illegal wiretapping in the 21st century.

Such extrapolations, however, are left to the reader to craft: Dunn's vision remains firmly entrenched in the decline of a grand old dominion, from rich and powerful statehood to defeated battlefield in a tragic civil war.

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"DOMINION OF MEMORIES: Jefferson, Madison, and the Decline of Virginia"

Susan Dunn

Basic Books. 310 pp. \$27.50