

The Virginians

By Andrew Knowles

Thomas and his family live in the wooded hills in a place called Gloucester, Virginia. Gloucester is not far from Yorktown, Virginia where the revolutionary war would finally come to an end. Thomas lives with his wife and 2 daughters. He does small odd jobs for families in the surrounding areas to make ends meet but most enjoys cooking for others and selling meat and produce to those who need it. The families in the area are a diverse bunch. Some are old, some are young, some farm while some do small trades such as masonry or blacksmithing. Since the beginning of the rebellion, the area has felt the brunt of economic turmoil. None of the families have been inclined to choose a side in the conflict, only to provide for their own families. Thomas does most of the work around the home and he tries to find work when he can. That is where our story begins in 1781.

Thomas trudged up the wooded trail with a heavy wood bucket in each hand, water lapping at the sides as he waddled back and forth. The trip back and forth to the well down the hill from his home seemed longer and longer in the past few years. He did enjoy the walk, though. He used the time to think of the past and better times, and the future if those times were to return. As he walked out of the woods into the clearing, he peered upon his humble farmhouse where he, his wife, and two daughters lived. His father had built the home years ago with great pride. Lately, his humble abode had fallen into a sad state of repair, as supplies such as nails and plaster were in short supply.

Thomas briefly glanced at a small wooden structure that used to be his famed smokehouse. Once upon a time, he would cook large cuts of pork for his family and neighbors to consume on every holiday. Nearly every day he would have oak logs roaring in the bottom fire

pit that would cause smoke to billow up and cascade through the trees. That pork was long gone, as well as the celebrations of holidays, birthdays, and anniversaries. No one had any time or patience for that now.

Fanny, Thomas' wife, handed Thomas a small handkerchief as he walked through the door to wipe the sweat from his brow. He placed the pails by the fireplace where dinner was cooking and offered a quiet greeting to his young daughters Rebekah and Charity, 4 and 6 respectively. The girls were trying their best at organizing the family's laundry that Fanny had placed in a large wicker basket.

When Fanny put dinner in front of Thomas he sighed and forced a smile so that his daughters would not pick up on his disappointment. As he looked down at his bowl, he struggled to remember the last time there was even a small piece of meat in the bowl. In times of late, the watered-down stews his wife made were composed of whatever they could grow in their modest garden. During the winter, the stews and soups got skimpier and skimpier until the first spring vegetable harvest brought a crop.

After Fanny and Thomas put the girls down to bed the young couple sat down at the large wooden table and spoke of plans for the next day. Thomas was planning on chopping down a large oak tree that had slowly died over the past few years. 3 years ago, a company of Continental soldiers had camped on the property temporarily at Thomas' insistence. During that time, they would use the tree to hang targets and work on their marksmanship by shooting into the tree. Thomas assumed that it had something to do with the tree's death.

Thomas woke up at the crack of dawn and quickly got dressed and made his way out to the edge of the property to handle the oak tree that he spoke with Fanny about the evening before. When he got close to the road, Thomas saw Josiah, an elderly man who lived about a

mile down the road who was out for his morning walk. Josiah had a similar demeanor to Thomas, an attitude wrought with disappointment from the previous few years. Thomas was eager to strike up a conversation with him and find how he and his wife were fairing through the very hot summer. It was getting frustrating for Fanny and Thomas to keep her vegetables from getting dried out, so he knew Josiah's much older wife was also having difficulty. Thomas did not much have the means to assist in anyway, but he still wanted to be a friendly neighbor.

Josiah informed Thomas of a brush in with a continental deserter who was cutting through his property. Josiah gave the young man whatever food he could and asked him to stay but both Josiah and the boy knew that could be fateful for both of them, so the soldier went on his way.

The rebellion had been going on for about 6 years now and as far as everyone in the small farming area was concerned, it was far from over. Not one of Thomas' neighbors was really interested in taking sides and helping any soldiers that made it through the area was making it difficult to provide for their own families. It was becoming difficult to live a normal life due to the financial and economic hardships that the war had brought.

At the beginning of the conflict, the opposing armies passed through Gloucester, VA and provided some business for Thomas through purchasing room and board. In addition, each army had a great need for large sides of beef and pork to be cooked, to which Thomas gladly obliged, when paid handsomely. Since then, the passing soldiers would pay less and less and sometimes even steal or 'confiscate' Thomas' product. It was increasingly difficult to find suitable meat to feed their families. In addition, the forests had been hunted clean in recent years by passing militias, deserters, and scoundrels, who were also very hungry.

With diminishing food, health had also become an issue. The winters became increasingly difficult and illness became more prevalent. The McGradys, another young family, who lived 2 miles away, lost their first and only child over the previous winter to a cough. The death weighed heavy on the entire area of the dozen or so families. It made the ongoing war and its difficulties a staunch reality to each family, especially the parents of young children. At times, the adults would travel to other areas outside their county to see if they could find some more provisions to better last the winters. These efforts were often in vain.

Josiah finally sent out a letter to everyone who lived near Thomas requesting that there be a meeting. Every family was eager to find a solution to provide for themselves, perhaps working together was the key. The mothers and fathers from each family met together and decided that it was essential for them to set up some sort of roadblock and perimeter to keep thieves and surrounding armies away. They set up a schedule where two men would set a post and protect their street and notify everyone if need be to protect their homes. They would change the watch twice a day and take turns to ensure their communities safety. Everyone left the meeting feeling excited to begin getting their lives back together.

One day, months later, Josiah and Thomas approach the watch to take over the post for the night. They spoke with the two young men who were standing guard when Thomas heard a drumming coming from down the road. One of the boys ran to get the rest of the men from their houses to be prepared to defend their small community. The remaining three men watched down the road as the sound got louder and louder. Finally, Thomas could see the blue-clad soldiers round a turn and slowly march towards their guard post.

Continental army soldiers, ragged and beaten approached the neighborhood roadblock that they developed after their town hall. Thomas, Josiah, and the remaining young man

remained at the ready, hoping that help will arrive soon. The Virginians are shaking with fear that they will have to defend themselves, with deadly force if necessary. They raise their muskets as the soldiers come within range. However, the captain at head of their column waves a white flag and approaches the men. The young officer informs them of the surrender to the south in Yorktown, Virginia and that none of this is necessary.

Josiah and Thomas looked at each other in disbelief. They could not have imagined an end to this war, and it was finally over. Thomas and Josiah hugged the young officer and invited him to bring his men to celebrate with a feast. The young officer revealed a wagon with 3 large hogs.

Later that day, Thomas smiled to himself as smoke billowed out his smoker's chimney once more.