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The Forgotten President

by Edwin Slipek Jr.

Presidential fever swept Richmond in 1858. It wasn't about elections, but dead presidents. And it hit a pinnacle with the longest parade ever staged here.

Undeterred by snow, rain and hail, the celebratory procession shivered and snaked its way into Capitol Square Feb. 22, 1858. It was George Washington's birthday, and officials from every state -- including the governors of New York, Connecticut and Michigan — were on hand for the dedication of a grandiose monument honoring the nation's first president. The sculpture depicted the American Revolutionary War hero in military regalia astride his horse.

But something was missing. A crypt inside the monument's granite base had been readied in hopes that the former president's remains would be transferred from Mount Vernon to Capitol Square. Washington's family, however, had declined the gesture. The tomb remains empty today.



More successfully, five months later on the Fourth of July, Richmond landed a presidential corpse, that of Northern Neck native James Monroe, the fifth president and the only other presidential officer of the American Revolution.

But Monroe's posthumous arrival here was less of an honorific gesture and more of a savvy marketing tool for Richmond's economically struggling Hollywood Cemetery.

It had been a decade since private developers had completed Hollywood as a parklike, picturesque, 42-acre cemetery. But it was a resounding commercial flop. There were a number of reasons why. Adjoining property owners initially had opposed the project for fear it would depreciate their holdings and had secured a court injunction to stop burials. The market wasn't ready either. This was an era when churches and municipalities owned graveyards, and many families found it anathema that any decent businessman would profit from selling burial plots. Other people feared that only wealthy citizens could afford to be buried there. But the most compelling argument was that the cemetery was located immediately upstream from the city waterworks. Wouldn't the graveyard contaminate the water supply?

The outrage had finally subsided by 1856, but the project desperately needed a jump-start, a public-relations ploy.

Enter James Monroe — or his ghost, at least. In 1858, on the occasion of the centennial of the president's birth, Monroe's descendants gave the OK to remove his body from New York City, where he had last lived, died and been buried since 1831. The Virginia Legislature appropriated \$2,500 for moving expenses, a sum New York City matched. And there was new hope for Hollywood Cemetery.

So Monroe's disintegrating wooden coffin was pulled from his vault in Marble Cemetery on Manhattan's Lower East Side July 2, 1858. The inner lead coffin, still solid, was placed inside a new mahogany box. The original silver coffin plate, with 13 stars, was buffed and affixed to the new casket. The remains went briefly to a nearby church and then to City Hall, where some 10,000 New Yorkers paid their respects.

The following day, Friday, July 3, the remains of the Westmoreland County-born Monroe left New York harbor and began its journey to Hollywood Cemetery via a steamship named the Jamestown. Another ship, the Ericsson, carried an honor guard, the Seventh Regiment, New York Volunteers.

The New Yorkers reached the James River by Sunday evening, July 4, and while they sailed up the James River, a delegation of Richmonders moved downstream to greet them aboard the steamer Glen Cove.

Things didn't go smoothly. While Monroe's remains were secure aboard the Jamestown, the Ericsson ran aground in the

mud at Hog Island below Richmond. Most of the passengers transferred to the Glen Cove and made their way toward Rocketts Landing with their Richmond hosts. One casualty was the grandson of one of Monroe's old friends, Alexander Hamilton, who had fallen overboard and drowned in Gillies Creek.

On Monday morning, July 5, while Virginia troops stood at attention, Monroe's remains were transferred to an open hearse. It was pulled by six white horses and attended by six African-American grooms dressed in white. Honor guards from New York and Virginia flanked the coffin, bells tolled, a band played a soulful dirge and flags flew at half-staff. The procession made its way westward up Main Street toward Hollywood Cemetery.

Officials offered speeches and prayers at the new gravesite on a prominent hilltop overlooking the river. Then the guests proceeded to Gallego Mills, a large building on the canal downtown, where a festive dinner was served. Capitol Square was illuminated by torches that night.

As James Monroe's 250th birthday quietly approaches in less than two weeks, were those ceremonies in 1858, marking his centennial, a last hurrah?

It's been high season recently for the Founding Fathers. President George W. Bush waltzed French President Nicolas Sarkozy to Mount Vernon to see Washington's freshly restored plantation. In knee breeches, Paul Giamatti is chewing up the scenery as second President John Adams in the HBO miniseries of the same name. And Montpelier, the dramatically transfigured Orange County home of fourth President James Madison, just landed a glowing segment on "CBS Sunday Morning."

But things are decidedly more low-key for James Monroe with the April 28 birthday of the Virginia-born fifth president quickly approaching. In an informal poll this writer conducted, 100 Richmonders were asked recently which presidents were laid to rest in Richmond. Only 17 of them named Monroe (the other is John Tyler).

Why don't we know this man? Monroe wasn't idle; on the contrary, he served in more exalted positions than any other American — ever. His exhausting resume includes two terms as U.S. president; representative to the Continental Congress; U.S. senator from Virginia; secretary of state; secretary of war; minister to Great Britain; minister to Spain; twice minister to France; signer of the Louisiana Purchase; Army lieutenant colonel; president of the Virginia Constitutional Convention; two terms as Virginia's governor; three terms in the House of Delegates; and rector of the University of Virginia.

His name is all around us. There's Monroe Park, the centerpiece of Virginia Commonwealth University's Monroe Park Campus — but no monument to him graces the area. Downtown, there's Monroe Street and Monroe Ward. Just east of Capitol Square looms the state's Monroe Building, one of Virginia's tallest structures. A bust of Monroe does rest in a niche in the Capitol rotunda, but there's no major outdoor statue.

As for colleges in Virginia, does one bear his name in the way Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Richard Bland, John Tyler and George Washington (and even Washington's mother, Mary) are so honored? No.

Monroe's legacy suffers from his having lived in the shadows of luminous, contemporaneous but older and more brilliant Virginians such as Washington, Jefferson and Madison, who distinguished themselves either with remarkable military service or by penning epic documents such as the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution. Monroe was quiet, deliberate and a policy wonk. There was considerable correspondence between Jefferson and his protégé, but the topics were always practical and political, never philosophical.

Although little recognized in his native state, historians give him high marks. A 2002 Siena poll ranked Monroe the eighth most significant of all presidents, just behind Harry S. Truman and one spot ahead of Madison. His legacy probably rests on his 1823 proclamation of the Monroe Doctrine. It told Europe to keep out of the Western Hemisphere, especially Latin America, at a time when countries there were seeking independence and building statehood and Great Britain and Spain were attempting to cling to their former colonies.

But if all politics are local, Richmonders might embrace him. Monroe — albeit posthumously and indirectly — saved the now-landmark Hollywood Cemetery from financial ruin in 1858. And other connections intertwine Monroe with Richmond.

While the Revolution raged in 1779, then-Gov. Thomas Jefferson moved the state capital from Williamsburg to Richmond. Monroe, who was studying law with Jefferson, moved here as a gubernatorial staff member. Monroe had a 6-foot rawboned frame, with wide-set eyes and a dimpled chin.

After the Revolution, while practicing law in the Northern Neck, Monroe was elected to the Virginia House of Delegates from Westmoreland County in 1782. He joined the governor's Council of State — the cabinet — which necessitated his living in Richmond.

Jefferson and Monroe's friendship is evidenced by the fact that when Jefferson sailed to Europe to serve as minister to France, he left Monroe under the direct tutelage of James Madison, deposited a number of books for Monroe to read and,

not unimportantly, put his French-speaking chef in Monroe's kitchen. Conversations with the cook established Monroe's fluency in French.

In 1783 Monroe moved to New York City, where he served three years in the Continental Congress. Three years later he returned to Virginia with his 18-year-old bride, Elizabeth Kortright. Her once-wealthy merchant father had lost everything in the Revolution, so the family traveled and socialized extensively in Europe with the aim of marrying their daughter into nobility. Although Monroe had solid, old-Virginia lineage, the Kortrights weren't thrilled with the union.

The newlyweds settled in Fredericksburg, where Monroe practiced law, and he was again elected to the House of Delegates in 1787.

When Jefferson returned to Monticello from France in 1790, Monroe decided to move to a nearby farm in Albemarle County to stay in a politically expedient orbit. Later that year, with Jefferson's support, Monroe was elected to a four-year term in the U.S. Senate. In many ways he was Jefferson's voice there, but this also began a remarkable 35-year public career at the highest levels of state and national government.

About this time Jefferson wrote appreciatively of his protégé, "Turn his soul wrong side outwards and there is not a speck on it."

After Monroe's Senate term, President Washington appointed him minister to France in 1794 because of his Francophile leanings. But Monroe was abruptly recalled in 1796 after enthusiastically referring to the United States as "an ally and sister Republic" of France, whereas Washington had stressed strict neutrality.

For the next two years Monroe farmed in Albemarle County and grew even closer to Jefferson and Madison in order to regain his foothold in Virginia politics.

It worked. In 1799 Monroe was elected governor of Virginia.

When James and Elizabeth Monroe moved to Richmond in December 1799, it was a town of about 5,700 residents. The governor's house was a modest frame structure at the corner of Broad and 14th streets, near the site of the modern-day Executive Mansion. Unlike the current residence, the home faced east, looking toward shabby tenements on the western slope of Shockoe Valley. Chickens, goats and cattle roamed the grounds and the unpainted house was described as "very plain, but spacious enough."

The Monroes, who had known Paris, refused to move in until repairs were made. He described the place as "a large chicken coup ... with two apartments." For about eight months they lived in rented quarters, furnished with lavish pieces of furniture the couple had purchased in France. Within the Monroe family circle, French was always spoken.

In August 1800, after moving into the remodeled executive residence, one of the major events of Monroe's term occurred.

Gabriel Prosser, a slave who lived north of Richmond, organized a slave revolt to attack Richmond. The plan called for some 1,000 men to overtake the governor and other officials and seize armaments stored in the Capitol. But on the designated night, torrential rains flooded waterways around Richmond, destroyed roads and kept the slaves from assembling. One slave, who saw the storm as an omen, alerted his owner. The rebellion was squelched.

Prosser was captured and enchained on horseback, and then paraded into the governor's front yard for Monroe to see. Monroe later visited Prosser in jail in an attempt to gain information from him, but the rebel remained silent. Prosser was publicly hanged.

A more personal setback for Monroe occurred during his first term as governor, when the couple's only son died as an infant. This left emotional scars, and thereafter the Monroes made sharp distinctions between their public and private lives — an approach they carried with them to the White House (the two Monroe daughters, Eliza and Maria, lived to adulthood).

A happier occasion during Monroe's governorship was Jefferson's inauguration as president in March 1801. As Virginia governor, Monroe personally oversaw public and lavish celebrations in Capitol Square.

After Monroe's term as governor expired in 1802, he was asked by President Jefferson to go to Paris to negotiate the Louisiana Purchase. Thus, Monroe's name is on America's most successful real-estate transaction.

After a few years in Europe pursuing less-successful diplomatic tasks, Monroe returned home and in 1808 made a failed bid for the presidency, unwisely challenging James Madison, his friend and adviser, for the nomination. Madison was elected.

Jefferson suggested that Monroe reconnect with his political base, and in 1810 Monroe returned for a third term in the House of Delegates. A year later, in January 1811, Monroe won a second term as governor.

Upon moving back to Richmond, James and Elizabeth Monroe found the governor's residence even more decrepit than when they'd left. So the General Assembly authorized the construction of a new official manse and in the interim rented a home for the couple at Marshall and Ninth streets, across from Monroe's childhood friend, John Marshall. The new mansion was completed in 1813 and has served continuously since.

Apparently President Madison had no hard feelings about Monroe's presidential challenge and appointed him secretary of state within months of Monroe's swearing-in as governor. During the War of 1812 Monroe also served as secretary of war.

In 1816 Monroe was elected president. It was a successful presidency known as "The Era of Good Feelings." It helped that the nation was at peace and political parties weren't tearing each other apart.

Monroe was inaugurated in Washington, D.C., in the spring of 1817. There was another living-space glitch to come. Because the White House was being rebuilt after being set ablaze during the War of 1812, the Monroes rented temporary quarters on Pennsylvania Avenue.

Officials who awaited invitations from the first family were disappointed. The Virginia charm and hospitality with which Dolley Madison had captivated the nation's capital was replaced by the Monroes' personal and European reserve. Some were put off by Elizabeth Monroe's failure to appear at the inaugural reception. One person called her "a little too New York."

Elizabeth Kortright had married a Virginian, but she brought aristocratic style to the White House. The first lady furnished their home with elaborate French pieces that the couple had acquired from deposed French aristocracy, including a chair that had belonged to Marie Antoinette. That sent a message.

In January 1818 the restored White House was ready for guests. Many of them were shocked to see it was furnished in specially ordered, elaborate French furniture.

"It was more palace than home, with no attempt to re-create Dolley's sunny Anglo-American country-house comfort," historian Carl S. Anthony wrote. "Everything gilded regal — in a word, French. There were two ... chairs, resembling thrones."

Elizabeth Monroe acknowledged guests with a slight nod of the head. Official dinners were not relaxed occasions — each guest was assigned a butler.

The White House was open to most visitors, and in an attempt to maintain decorum, the first lady stationed guards at the entrances to ensure callers were properly dressed. At one point she and her husband even suggested that high-ranking government officials wear prescribed uniforms. This didn't fly.

Louisa Adams, wife of Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, wrote to her mother-in-law, former first lady Abigail Adams, "Mrs. Monroe was in the highest style of fashion and moved not like a queen — for that is an unpardonable word in this country — but like a goddess."

"In my day," feisty Abigail replied, "if so much style, pomp and etiquette had been assumed, the cry of 'Monarchy, Monarchy' would have resounded from Georgia to Maine."

What the first lady's detractors didn't realize was that despite her youthful and remarked-upon good looks, she was in poor health. This is mentioned in the only letter from Monroe to his wife that survives. Probably an epileptic, a condition not understood at the time, she preferred the company of family and close friends.

But Elizabeth Monroe's style set the bar for how the White House looks today. After becoming first lady in 1961, Jacqueline Kennedy read a scholarly article about the then-vanished Monroe furnishings. Her successful search for remaining pieces sparked her signature contribution to her term, a historically grounded restoration and redecoration of the White House.

President John Quincy Adams succeeded Monroe in March 1825, and the Monroes retired to Oak Hill, their Loudoun County farm. Here James Monroe farmed, organized his papers and attempted to improve his poor financial condition.

In 1826 he became regent of the University of Virginia, the institution that his mentor, Thomas Jefferson, had recently established. That same year Jefferson died, and once again, Monroe was in place to carry out his mentor's work.

Monroe was called to Richmond for the last time in October 1829, on official business for the Virginia Constitutional Convention. He joined elders from the earliest days of the nation, such as Madison and Marshall. Monroe was honored by being named chairman and he attended sessions regularly for two months.

"Monroe was very wrinkled and weather-beaten," an observer wrote at the convention — "ungraceful in attitude and gestures and his speeches only commonplace." But Monroe's health was failing and in December he resigned and

returned home.

His wife died in the fall of 1830. In deep sadness and in virtual poverty, Monroe moved to New York City to live with his daughter Maria. He died in 1831 — like his mentor, Jefferson, on the Fourth of July.

He was buried in New York City after the largest funeral observance the city had ever witnessed. He lay in Marble Cemetery until 1858, when his body was returned to Virginia's capital city. **S**

Honoring Monroe

In addition to the spectacular, cast-iron enclosure that marks Monroe's grave in Hollywood Cemetery, there have been considerable efforts to honor his legacy.

In the 1920s a descendant purchased the site of Monroe's law office in Fredericksburg to be maintained as a shrine. This was thought to be more accessible to the public than his Westmoreland County birth site. Besides, according to a report that reflected the racist attitudes at the time, the birth site was "hemmed in with negro shacks ... not a proper situation and setting for anything that attempts to do honor to [Monroe's] memory."

There was an effort in the 1930s to build a parkway in Westmoreland County connecting Stratford Hall Plantation (the ancestral home of Robert E. Lee), Monroe's birthplace and Washington's birthplace. A promotional brochure described the project as "The Athens of the American Republic." But bridging the waterways and marshes was prohibitively expensive.

A later, more-colorful plan called for establishing a memorial aviary containing exotic birds from Latin American countries as a grand gesture to the Monroe Doctrine. That didn't take off.

Efforts currently are under way, working with archaeologists at the College of William and Mary and architectural historians from Colonial Williamsburg Inc. to rebuild the modest frame house and interpret it as an 18th-century homestead.

A commemorative ceremony will take place at the site of Monroe's boyhood home near Colonial Beach in Westmoreland County at 10:30 a.m. Saturday, April 26.

On the occasion of Monroe's 250th birthday April 28 at 11 a.m., the James Monroe Memorial Foundation will conduct wreath-laying ceremonies at the former president's Hollywood Cemetery gravesite. Later that day the foundation will have a retreat ceremony at Fort Monroe in Hampton.

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