

The Dictionary of Virginia Biography: An Overview

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Biography is one of the oldest literary and historical forms. Since ancient times, chroniclers have used the lives of important and interesting people to tell the history of major events, societies, or nations. While modern critics periodically debate the merit and methodology of biographical study and disagree on whether it is more art than science or history, biography has continued to endure as a popular and useful genre. Most people find it easier to relate to the past through the life stories of individuals viewed within the context of their time and place. Historians rely heavily on biography, finding themselves unable to interpret and analyze important episodes and developments without knowing something about the men and women involved in shaping them.

Those who study Virginia's past have long been hampered by a dearth of easily accessible and reliable biographical information. Helpful collective biographies have been published in the past half century, but most of these works have focused on particular professions, organizations, or sections of the state. The only comprehensive work, now long out of print, is Lyon Gardiner Tyler's five-volume *Encyclopedia of Virginia Biography*. Published in 1915 (with a supplementary volume in 1929), the *Encyclopedia* undertook to present the lives of Virginia's most important political, military, business, and social leaders primarily in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries. Reflecting the time in which it was written, the *Encyclopedia's* pages fail to mention virtually all notable or accomplished Virginia women, Native Americans, African Americans, and, of course, twentieth-century figures. In 1940 the staff of the Virginia Writers' Project began extensive research in the collections of the Virginia State Library (now the Library of Virginia), hoping to produce a more inclusive statewide reference work. This New Deal venture ended before the research could be completed, but the need for a modern biographical series persisted. The new social history pioneered in the 1960s further increased the need for an updated biographical work. Community-based studies illuminated the lives of many Virginians unknown to previous scholars, and researchers showed that so-called "ordinary" people sometimes had an extraordinary impact on larger historical events and trends.

The Library of Virginia established the *Dictionary of Virginia Biography* project to help fill this gap in the historical literature as well as to foster greater awareness of the richness and variety of Virginia's past. The *DVB* also represents one of the Library's most important scholarly contributions to the commemoration of the four-hundredth anniversary of Virginia's founding in 2007.

Criteria for Inclusion

The *Dictionary of Virginia Biography*, or *DVB*, is a multivolume historical reference work intended for teachers, students, librarians, historians, journalists, genealogists, museum professionals, and other researchers who have a need for biographical information about those Virginians who, regardless of place of birth or death, made significant contributions to the history or culture of their locality, state, or nation. From the late sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, the term *Virginia* has been applied to territory much farther north, south, and west on the North American continent than the state's modern-day borders. For purposes of the *DVB*, Virginia is defined by the state's current geographic boundaries, plus Kentucky prior to statehood in 1792 and West Virginia prior to statehood in 1863. With a few exceptions, no person is included who did not live a significant portion of his or her life in Virginia.

A biographical reference work such as the *DVB* cannot possibly include every interesting or successful person who lived in the past, but it should encompass all those who had an important impact on their communities or who achieved extraordinary recognition from their contemporaries or from posterity. The definition of significance necessarily varies from century to century, from one geographic region to another, and from one field of endeavor to another.

Certain categories of people, most of whom were involved in public life, are included automatically because their participation in events of great consequence has made them frequent subjects of requests for biographical information. The categories of automatic inclusion are: Virginia-born presidents of the United States; governors and lieutenant governors of Virginia (including absentee royal governors); members of the governor's Council during the colonial period and of the Council of State between 1776 and its abolition in 1851; Speakers of the House of Burgesses, the House of Delegates, and the Senate of Virginia; African American and female members of the General Assembly; Virginia members of the Continental Congress, the Confederation Congress, the United States Congress, and the Confederate States Congress; cabinet officers of the United States and the Confederate States governments resident in Virginia when appointed; justices of the United States Supreme Court and judges of the United States appellate and district courts resident in Virginia when appointed; judges of the highest appellate court in Virginia; attorneys general of Virginia; members of all Virginia constitutional conventions from 1776 through 1902 and of the federal constitutional convention of 1787; members of the Virginia Ratification Convention of 1788 and of the Secession Convention of 1861; members of the Virginia State Corporation Commission; general officers from Virginia in the American Revolution, the War of 1812, and the Civil War; winners of major national or international awards, such as Pulitzer and Nobel Prizes; presidents of important national or international organizations; and presidents of the major institutions of higher education in Virginia.

Most of the persons who are included in the *Dictionary of Virginia Biography* do not fall into one of these automatic categories. Rather, they are Virginians whose lives and careers made them exceptional in their communities and professions. Some are associated with unusually important or notorious events, such as Floyd Allen, principal in the 1912 gunfight in the Carroll

County courthouse, and the slave Mary Aggie, defendant in a precedent-setting court case. Others, such as frontierswoman Anne Hennis Trotter "Mad Anne" Bailey, are included because they became legendary figures and require a reliable biographical entry that separates fact from fiction.

As a historical reference work, the *Dictionary of Virginia Biography* does not include persons living at the time of publication. Military and naval officers temporarily residing in Virginia also fall outside the selection criteria. As a general rule, persons who moved to Virginia to take employment with the United States government and whose distinction in their professional or political careers was entirely associated with United States government service are not included.

The many native Virginians who have left the state in pursuit of fame, fortune, or professional success pose more complicated questions of inclusion. Many expatriates achieved significant national or international success in fields that they could not pursue at the highest levels in Virginia, such as diplomacy, military service, the theater, or sports. In the process many of them have ceased to be identified in the public eye as Virginians, and their limited contributions to Virginia's history and culture do not justify including entries on them in the *Dictionary of Virginia Biography*. One such person is the singer Pearl Bailey who, though born in Virginia, did not pursue her career in the state and instead became a truly national figure. The lives and careers of many other people became inextricably linked with other places, such as Great Britain (Nancy Langhorne Astor, viscountess Astor), Kentucky (Henry Clay), or Texas (Sam Houston), and they are not included because their lives are not normally regarded as integral parts of Virginia's history and culture.

Some native Virginians who left the state will be included if they continued to identify themselves as Virginians, if their contemporaries regarded them as Virginians, or if they left such convincing evidence of their permanent attachment to Virginia that their lives and their careers elsewhere cannot be separated from the Virginia context. Public administrator Robert Franklin Bane and illustrator Walter Joseph Biggs are examples. The editors have considered each of these cases individually and have tried to keep the focus on the history and culture of Virginia.

Family history research has played an important part in the production of the *Dictionary of Virginia Biography*, although the biographies do not contain a full genealogical record of Virginia's most influential families. Authors have noted family relationships, as needed, to find, verify, and correct dates of birth, death, and marriage; to identify or enumerate parents, children, siblings, and spouses; to evaluate the role of important family members in a subject's life; and to take notice of other family members whose lives a subject strongly influenced.

In the process of conducting research in original records, *DVB* contributors have discovered many new sources of information, verified or corrected many dates, and overturned several old assumptions. An example is the biography of David Bell, who died in December 1799, eleven years after he represented Buckingham County in the ratification convention of 1788. The few references to Bell in secondary sources identify him as an aging brother-in-law of Revolutionary statesman Archibald Cary. During the research on Bell's life, the contributor

discovered that Cary's brother-in-law David Bell had actually died in 1770 and that the convention delegate from Buckingham County was that man's second son of the same name. Another instance involves Edward Bennett, one of the great seventeenth-century merchants of England and the Netherlands. He was the head of a large and far-flung trading family, and several of his close relatives rose to economic and political prominence in Virginia. The name Edward Bennett appears on the list of burgesses for the General Assembly session in the spring of 1628. If this burgess had been Edward Bennett the famous merchant, he certainly would have warranted inclusion in the *DVB*. Careful research, however, revealed that the merchant Bennett was residing at that same time in Hamburg, where he was serving as deputy governor of the English merchant community in that German city. Since he could not have been in Jamestown and Hamburg simultaneously, clearly it was one of his namesake kinsmen who served in the General Assembly in 1628. The famous merchant and paterfamilias may never have resided in Virginia at all, or if he did it was for so brief a time as to place him outside the criteria for the *DVB*.

Compiling the DVB

Dictionary of Virginia Biography was a daunting one. The project's inception in the mid-1980s enabled the *DVB* staff and contributors to benefit from many technological advances. The advent of desktop computers equipped with sophisticated word-processing and data-management programs made an ambitious project such as the *DVB* much more feasible and manageable. Research across four centuries of Virginia history has also been facilitated tremendously in recent years by the nationwide conversion of paper-based library and manuscript catalogs to online, searchable databases. In addition, there has been tremendous growth in the number of collection analyses, finding aids, and indexes to original source material appearing in published, microfilm, and electronic formats. The development of Internet technology has further revolutionized traditional research methodologies, particularly in the area of biography. Only a few keystrokes are now necessary to search for personal names in the Virginia Colonial Records Project, Virginia's Revolutionary and Civil War Pension Records, or the Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN) database of manuscript holdings, to name only a few of the thousands of resources to which researchers can gain access by computer in their libraries, offices, and homes.

The wonders of technology have transformed the way historians practice their craft and enhanced their ability to ferret out new information, but they cannot overcome the many frustrating realities that continue to plague students of Virginia history. It is difficult, and occasionally impossible, to research particular periods and topics comprehensively because of the loss of many of the state's records to war, fire, natural disaster, and neglect. And despite the recent surge of innovative scholarship ranging from early Chesapeake settlement to the twentieth-century political arena, for a myriad of important Virginia subjects too little is still known because the topics have yet to be explored seriously. The editors of the *DVB* have striven since the beginning of the project to surmount these obstacles, to the extent possible, through creative and careful research, understanding that the quality and usefulness of the project would depend in large part on the thoroughness of the quest for potential *DVB* subjects.

The editors began the search for *Dictionary of Virginia Biography* candidates by surveying all existing nineteenth- and twentieth-century reference works, encyclopedias, directories, and historical journals containing biographical information on Virginians. Once this task was completed, they spent several years reading the extensive printed literature in the Library's vast collection relating to Virginia's towns, cities, counties, churches, schools, businesses, professions, industries, social and cultural organizations, political institutions, military units, and reform societies. Much of this material consisted of books and articles written by modern-day historians, but a large proportion of the Library's collection also comprises annual reports, yearbooks, catalogs, promotional brochures, and commemorative publications issued through time by community organizations across the state. These works in particular proved to be gold mines for biographical information about Virginians whose stories have not yet been adequately told elsewhere. For example, a systematic survey of the surviving records of women's voluntary associations and the extant issues of nineteenth- and twentieth-century African American newspapers helped to fill important gaps in the existing historiography. *DVB* staff members traveled to the state's leading public libraries and historical repositories to study their rich printed and manuscript resources and regularly sought the advice of local historians, genealogists, subject specialists, and scholars whose collective expertise extended well beyond the available published sources.

When the initial search for *DVB* candidates concluded, the editorial staff had compiled a list of 18,500 possible subjects. Further research to assess and substantiate each potential subject's significance within the project's selection criteria substantially pared down this list. The final number of biographies to be published in the completed *DVB* series is expected to be about 6,000.

The Biographies

The entries in the *Dictionary of Virginia Biography* appear in alphabetical order. Where two or more subjects share the same name, they appear in chronological order by date of birth. Insofar as possible, persons of the same name are distinguished by their dates, not by the confusing and changing use of appellations such as *Jr.* and *Sr.*, or by Roman numerals, unless the subjects always identified themselves in that way. Subjects holding titles of nobility will appear under the title in its proper alphabetical order. Thus the biography of Governor Norborne Berkeley, baron de Botetourt, will appear under *Botetourt* with a cross reference at *Berkeley, Norborne*. When a woman had more than one surname during her lifetime, the biography will be included under the name by which she became famous or under which she is most likely to be looked up, usually but not always the last surname. For example, Frances Culpeper married three times to Samuel Stephens, Sir William Berkeley, and Philip Ludwell. She is best known to students of Virginia's colonial history as Lady Frances Berkeley, and the biography of Frances Culpeper Stephens Berkeley Ludwell will consequently appear under *Berkeley, Frances*, with a cross-reference under her last married surname, *Ludwell*.

Some people who spent all or parts of their lives as slaves and left no recoverable surname will be listed under the name they used. For example, Gabriel, who was hanged in October 1800 for

organizing an antislavery conspiracy, is identified in some older reference works as Gabriel Prosser, but the surname belonged to his owner and was not applied to him at the time of his sudden fame. His entry will be given under the single name of Gabriel, rather than Gabriel Prosser. By the same line of reasoning the slave named James, who gained his freedom for his meritorious services during the American Revolution and subsequently took the surname Lafayette, will be listed as James Lafayette, the appellation that he chose, and not as James Armistead (Armistead being the surname of his owner), although some subsequent accounts refer to him as James Armistead or James Armistead Lafayette.

The biographies of Native American Virginians will also be listed under the name that each person used during his or her lifetime, when that can be determined accurately. It is often impossible to know precisely which name (or spelling of a name) sixteenth- or seventeenth-century Native Americans preferred, for the evidence documenting their lives is commonly derived from accounts written by English and other European explorers and settlers. When it is not possible to determine the authentic rendering of a Native American name, or when a Native American became widely known by another name in the surviving records, the name that can best be documented will be used. The biography of Powhatan's famous daughter, therefore, will appear under Pocahontas, the name by which she was known to the Jamestown settlers and to history ever since, with cross-references for her given Indian name, Matoaka, and for the English name by which she was known after her marriage, Rebecca Rolfe.

All dates before Parliament's adoption of the Gregorian, or New Style, calendar for Great Britain and its colonies in 1752 are rendered in the *DVB* in the way that modern scholarship treats them. The new year is understood to begin on 1 January rather than on 25 March, which had been the case with the Julian, or Old Style, calendar. Colonial Virginians were accustomed to the two calendar systems and often combined them to avoid confusion. A date could, for example, be rendered as February 1714/5--that is, February 1714 by the Julian calendar, February 1715 by the Gregorian calendar. In the *Dictionary of Virginia Biography*, the date will be given in the modern form according to the Gregorian calendar.

Names of Virginia counties, cities, and towns ordinarily appear without additional identification, unless they are too obscure to be familiar to a general reader. Counties, cities, and towns outside Virginia are normally followed by the name of the colony, state, or nation in which they are found unless there is no possibility of confusion. Spellings of place-names follow the latest edition of *Merriam Webster's Geographical Dictionary* supplemented by Thomas H. Biggs, *Geographic and Cultural Names in Virginia* (1974).

A concise bibliographical source note follows each *DVB* entry. The source notes are not comprehensive lists of all materials used in preparing the biographies. They are intended rather as references to the most important primary and secondary sources for further research on each subject, including citations of obituaries and, if known, the location of at least one formal portrait or other likeness. The bibliographical notes do not contain references to the archival location of original county and municipal government records and record groups because many of these records are readily available elsewhere in other formats, such as microforms, and also

because, as the state's archives and the localities' records and archival programs change and expand, many classes of local records are being moved from courthouses to other record centers. Researchers should consult the bibliographies and other archival finding aids at the Library of Virginia to ascertain the location of original records and to learn whether they may also be available elsewhere or in an alternative microform or electronic format.

Entries in the *DVB* vary greatly in length. The length of each entry depends in part on the significance of the subject but also on the complexity of the subject's career, the breadth of source material documenting his or her life, and whether it is possible to find information about the subject handily in other secondary accounts. As the editors of the *Dictionary of American Biography* advised readers when their first volume was published in 1928, a biographical reference work is not a suitable place to supply complete, detailed accounts of the subjects' lives, indulge in elegant prose, or unveil and defend controversial interpretations of historic events. A biographical dictionary should instead provide reliable facts and an informed assessment of the significance of the subjects' lives and careers, and the editors of the *DVB* have endeavored to follow this model.

Many of the entries in the *Dictionary of Virginia Biography* have been prepared by members of the Library's staff, but the editors have also invited distinguished outside experts to contribute biographies based on their own research. Volume 1 of the *DVB* contains 477 biographies researched and written by 262 contributors from three countries on two continents. Volume 2 contains 452 biographies written by 247 contributors. Each volume of the *DVB* will have a cutoff date for inclusion, determined well in advance of publication. No person who died after 31 December 1995 is included in volume 1. No person who died after 31 December 1998 is included in volume 2.

View the [classified index](#) that breaks down the names chronologically, geographically, and by occupations, race, and gender. At the conclusion of the project a comprehensive index to the *DVB* will be published as the final volume.

The *Dictionary of Virginia Biography* project has been from the start a fully cooperative and collaborative effort, relying on the interest, support, and expertise of a worldwide community of archivists, historians, librarians, genealogists, and other researchers who are committed to preserving and interpreting Virginia's past. The project's many strengths flow from the collective talents and energy of this vast assemblage, as well as from the contributions of generations of researchers and writers whose work has provided the critical foundation on which all contemporary historians must rely.