Welcome to the Library of Virginia, guardian of Virginia’s collective experience and the trusted steward of many priceless records that document America’s historic path to freedom.

Here, you’ll find the story of Virginia—and all Virginians—told through nearly 97 million documents, books, photographs, maps, works of art, newspapers, recordings, posters, and official records preserved with state-of-the-art care and housed and protected in the Library’s more than fifty-five miles of shelves in this building and in an enormous off-site Records Center.

These 97 million pieces of Virginia’s history comprise one of the most extensive and priceless collections in the world.
They tell us stories about the famous and the little known, the wealthy and the poor, the free and enslaved, the educated and the illiterate, and the people and their representatives.

The records of many of the nation’s founders, and the legacies left by rulers are here, along with the writings of those who defined American freedom and helped establish the laws that have governed our country since before its beginning.

For those who love to browse through documents, the story of our Nation begins in Jamestown in 1607.

Six volumes published in 1624 provide the first account of Virginia’s history, with stories of early Native Americans, adventurers, planters, and governors.

The author of these books was none other than Captain John Smith.

Maps as well as descriptions of commodities, people, government, customs, and religion are found in these volumes.

For the scholar, historian, or amateur time-traveler, just one degree of separation lies between the earliest days in a bewildering new continent and the world we live in today.
A century later the story moves to nearby Williamsburg.

The new Virginia capital became the site of Virginia’s first library—the Council Library—where America’s founders were guided by reference books not only on law and politics but also geography, world history, science, and religion.

Many of the Council Library’s books and official government papers can be found today at the Library of Virginia, including the minutes of the last meeting of the House of Burgesses—an historic meeting in which that body decided to separate from England.

The clerk, who had been taking minutes in his customary small script, wrote this final word, “FINIS,” in script four inches high.

Thus with this final flourish, the era of colonial rule came to a fitting end.


It became law in Virginia and later was incorporated into the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights to the Constitution, becoming the sixteen words that have influenced the lives of Americans ever since.
MALE VOICE:
“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof. . .”

A rare manuscript copy of “The “Bill of Rights” containing those words is part of the Library of Virginia’s collections as well. It is one of only twelve surviving copies.

Here you can also find a copy of The Declaration of Independence—an early and exact facsimile, printed on sheepskin and inscribed with a dedication to the author, Mr. Jefferson.

As Governor of Virginia, it was Thomas Jefferson who proposed that a state library be established.

JEFFERSON’S VOICE
“The lost cannot be recovered, but let us save what remains.”

Jefferson’s dream became a reality in 1823, when the Virginia Legislature established this official state library. Ironically, by that time, the British had destroyed many of the colonial Council’s records and run off with much of Mr. Jefferson’s private and official correspondence.

There are records here from the days of Patrick Henry, Virginia’s first Governor. Every Virginia Governor since has had official records on file in the Library for historians and others to study.
Of course, the Library contains more than just the records of famous men and women. Here one can also learn about the lives of Virginia’s farmers, free laborers, indentured servants, and slaves.

About storekeepers, artisans, teachers, ministers, and other Virginians.

The Library has amassed such an extensive archive of court, business, organizational and family Bible records, as well as personal papers that many consider the Library of Virginia one of the most important family-research institutions in the United States.

Every year, the knowledgeable and professional staff assists more than 100,000 visitors from all over the world who come to explore their family’s history and its connection to the nation’s past.

Some trace their families to the early settlers who came to Virginia from the British Isles and Europe, using land grants, county records, tax rolls, and parish registers of birth, marriage, and death.

Virginians of African descent can trace their family history in these records, too, as well as in plantation, business and circuit court records and records of other activities of daily life received from state and local governments across the Commonwealth.

Consider Charles Ellis, of Goochland, a World War II recipient of the Bronze Star and five battle stars, whose grandfather was born a slave.
He never knew his grandmother’s maiden name. Now he does, thanks to records located in the Library of Virginia.

Those whose family members have served in the military can turn to our extraordinary Military Records Collection, which was established after the American Revolution when the Virginia Assembly ordered an inventory of the service records of soldiers and sailors that fought in that war for freedom.

These records touch many Virginians -- take, for example, Shirley Ann Minnix of Fincastle Virginia, whose father, Owen, became a husband at age 18, a father at 20, and a World War II casualty at 22. Shirley never knew a photograph existed showing her with her father . . . until recently, when a story about the Military Records Collection appeared in a local paper along with this photo and a caption that read, “Does she know there’s a picture in a box in Richmond that shows her on her daddy’s knee?”

Less than a hundred years after the American Revolution, the Civil War decimated the Library and its collections. During the fall of the Confederate Capital in April 1865, fleeing officials left the Library in a shambles, and many historic and valuable documents were lost or stolen.

Among these was the Virginia Ordinance of Secession, a manifesto dated April 17, 1861 that dissolved the union between the State of Virginia and the other states under the U.S. Constitution.
During the fire that destroyed much of Richmond, a Union soldier named Charles Bullis took the Ordinance of Secession home to New York where it remained until his passing. Eventually, the document was returned to the Library of Virginia.

Other Union soldiers and souvenir hunters rummaged through the Library in those final days of the Civil War, removing scores of unique manuscripts documenting Virginia's past.

Fortunately, many have since been recovered.

In War or at Peace, the story of the Library is Virginia's story.

Here you can see how Virginians grew, made and traded things—and sometimes even wrangled things.

You can trace Virginia's economy as it evolved from subsistence farming to manufacturing, and then to a service economy where industries like health care and technology work side-by-side.

As the official guardian of Virginia's collective experience, The Library of Virginia has been a leader in the preservation of historical records.
Skilled conservators use state-of-the-art technologies, along with traditional methods, to preserve and restore the vast collections, among them a unique set of miniature books, a priceless collection of George Washington’s letters and the papers of Virginia’s oldest insurance company.

The Library is also charged with the care of the State’s art collection. With this responsibility comes the complex task of art restoration.

An important recent project involved a portrait of a lady (sometimes identified as Queen Elizabeth I) painted by an unknown artist in England in the seventeenth century.

A gift to Virginia from Britain’s Lady Astor, who was born in Virginia, the painting had been in the Governor’s office for years.

When conservators removed yellowed varnish, small sections of the paint gave way, revealing the original painted surface underneath. After taking x-rays and infrared and ultraviolet photographs, a clear likeness emerged, restoring the painting to its original integrity after 300 years.

Virginia has produced many significant literary figures that include Edgar Allan Poe, Sherwood Anderson, Ellen Glasgow and Douglas Southall Freeman; Rita Dove, a Poet Laureate of the United States; Tom Wolfe, author of *The Right Stuff*; and William Styron, who wrote *Sophie’s Choice*.

Since its beginning, the Library has collected the works of Virginia authors, and today invites them to share their work through public readings and book signings.
The Library of Virginia officially recognizes outstanding Virginia poets, novelists, and historians every year, and the work of Virginia authors is housed for public review in a special room dedicated to Virginia authors on the Library’s second floor.

In the early 1900s, the closest library in most rural areas might have been hundreds of miles away. The Library of Virginia initiated a traveling library with boxes of books sent by train from town to town.

During the Second World War, the Library hit the road with bookmobiles—each capable of carrying from 500 to 1000 books into rural communities.

The Library arranged for thousands of books and magazines to be collected and sent to military bases, and War-related brochures, posters and promotional materials were added to the permanent collection.

The Library of Virginia continues to support the quality of life in Virginia’s communities through programs and services for libraries throughout the Commonwealth.

MUSIC CHANGES TO PUNCTUATE ENDING

Yes, the story of Virginia and Virginians is told in many ways and has been since 1607.
At the Library of Virginia it is told through 97 million extraordinary glimpses into our past -- our history -- each an individual tile in the vast and colorful mosaic of Virginia’s experience.

It is a story of Native Americans and early settlers.
Of farmers and plantation owners.
Of free men and slaves.
Of Patriots and Founding Fathers.
Of soldiers and peacemakers.
Of entrepreneurs, businessmen and women, tradesmen, and shop keepers
Of famous leaders and citizens of every walk of life.

This film is just an introduction to telling these stories.
Imagine how many more can be found at The Library of Virginia –

The Nation’s story, Virginia’s story, your story.