



# LIBRARY OF VIRGINIA

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Librarian of Virginia

## Library of Virginia Launches First Phase of *Virginia Untold: The African American Narrative* Creating a Fuller Picture of the African American Experience in Pre-Civil War Virginia

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For Immediate Release

(Richmond, VA) —The Library of Virginia is pleased to announce the first phase of **Virginia Untold: The African American Narrative**, a new digital collection of records that will help the public break through the “roadblock” that has long impeded African American history research. The project will bring to light the pre-Civil War experiences of African Americans documented in the Library’s primary source materials. These include a variety of local records.

Researchers have long lamented the scarcity of primary sources for information about the pre-Civil War lives of African Americans. Noted historian and host of PBS’ *Finding Your Roots* Dr. Henry Louis Gates Jr. referred to the Civil War as “a roadblock for many when researching their African American heritage.” Documents recording the pre-Civil War experiences of African Americans, enslaved or free, either do not exist or have been mostly inaccessible.

The **Virginia Untold** project began in 2013 through a generous donation from Dominion Resources. Since then more than 100,000 African American names have been indexed and nearly 40,000 digital images created. In this initial release, images of almost 5,000 records containing thousands of African American names are available on **Virginia Untold**. The images include freedom suits, freedom certificates, coroners’ inquisitions, certificates of importation, deeds of emancipation, petitions to remain in the commonwealth, petitions for re-enslavement, apprenticeship indentures, cohabitation registers, and tax lists.

Collectively, the documents found in the initial offering of **Virginia Untold** tell the stories of African Americans, enslaved and free, dating back to the 17th century. These stories include that of Hester Jane Carr, a free African American who was tricked into leaving her home in New York City and sold as a slave in Petersburg, as well as the sad story of Jenny, a slave who was brutally beaten to death by a white plantation manager in Brunswick County. Researchers can also learn about Dennis Holt, a free African American living in Campbell County who petitioned to be re-enslaved so that he could remain with his enslaved wife, or Rachel Findley’s successful years-long effort to win freedom for herself and more than 35 of her descendants in a Powhatan County court.

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“*Virginia Untold* marks the first step in making records from the Library’s vast collection of pre–Civil War African American historic records available in one interface,” said Librarian of Virginia Sandra G. Treadway. “We invite members of the community, educators, historians, and the digital library community to review our efforts by visiting [www.virginiamemory.com/collections/aan/](http://www.virginiamemory.com/collections/aan/) and contact us with your feedback about the site. Your comments will help us seek appropriate avenues for increased funding to enhance *Virginia Untold* and explore the possibility of collaborative partnerships.”

Exploring **Virginia Untold** will reveal how various record types work in concert to create a fuller picture of the lives of individual African Americans. For example, the story of an emancipated slave named John Brown can be found in a deed of emancipation and a petition to remain in the commonwealth, both found in Petersburg court records. Similarly, these stories may not be confined to one locality. Free African Americans were required by law to register in the locality in which they resided. Through **Virginia Untold**, one can trace the migration of free African Americans from one locality to another through the freedom certificates they received when they registered with local government officials.

Several record types found in **Virginia Untold** have been transcribed through our crowdsourcing project **Making History: Transcribe**, providing even greater search capability by allowing for full-text keyword searching. As more records are transcribed by the public through **Making History: Transcribe**, they will be added to **Virginia Untold**.

By making this narrative more accessible and encouraging the public to help transcribe the records, **Virginia Untold** will promote greater understanding and spark conversation about African American history in Virginia and the nation.

Following this initial release, Library of Virginia project staff will embark on a 6–9 month evaluation and assessment stage before making decisions about future directions for **Virginia Untold**. During this time period, staff will strive to engage users formally and informally, in person and online, seeking to understand the demographics of our users, while diving deeper when we can by gathering feedback and opinion on use, collection selection, and technology.

As those findings evolve, we will seek appropriate avenues for increased funding to support new technologies, more digital content, and collaborative partnerships with the public and other institutions.

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### About the Library of Virginia

The Library of Virginia ([www.lva.virginia.gov](http://www.lva.virginia.gov)), located in historic downtown Richmond, holds the world's most extensive collection of material about the Old Dominion and has been a steward of the commonwealth's documentary and printed heritage since 1823. The story of Virginia and Virginians has been told in many ways since 1607. At the Library of Virginia it is told through more than 120 million manuscripts and nearly two million books, serials, bound periodicals, microfilm reels, newspapers and state and federal documents, each an individual tile in the vast and colorful mosaic of Virginia's experience.