

Using Women's History Sources in the Archives at the Library of Virginia

Roanoke County farmwife Nancy Polk wrote to Governor Joseph Johnson in 1855. Her husband, Daniel, was selling her land and threatening to dispose of the property where she and their five children were living. In desperation, Nancy questioned the governor directly. He evidently never replied.

Roanoke County court records, census schedules, and land tax lists tell part of Nancy's story. By 1856, she had somehow persuaded her husband to sell her (for a dollar) the fifty-nine acres where she was living. When she and her daughter, Caroline, both died without wills in 1858, Daniel Polk inherited the contested land. Shortly afterward, he sold the parcel back to his youngest daughter, Isabella.

Nancy Polk's story is only one of the many waiting to be found and followed among the archival records, microfilm reels, and printed volumes at the Library of Virginia. These rich and diverse holdings reveal a great deal about the lives, activities, and aspirations of Virginia's women. A selection is listed below. Additional information may be found in *Women's History Sources: A Guide to Archives and Manuscript Collections in the United States*, edited by Andrea Hinding (New York, 1979); Suzanne Lebsock, *Virginia Women, 1600–1945: A Share of Honour* (Richmond, 1987); and Sandra Gioia Treadway, "New Directions in Virginia Women's History," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 100 (January 1992): 5–28.

Census Records

The Virginia censuses for 1790, 1800, part of 1810, and 1890 have not survived. Those for 1810–1880 and 1900–1930 are available on microfilm. Beginning in 1850, the schedules list the names of all individuals in the household on the day the census was taken. Age, sex, race, occupation, and other types of information appear in various years.

Certain censuses posed specific questions beneficial to researching women. The 1900 and 1910 schedules contain information on the number of years the couple had been married, the number of children born to the woman, and how many children were living. The 1930 census recorded age at first marriage.

Special schedules may also be helpful. From 1850–1880, agricultural schedules described family farms. In 1880, a schedule of the "Defective, Dependent, and Delinquent Classes" listed the blind, deaf-mute, idiotic, insane, and permanently disabled in Virginia, whether they lived at home or were institutionalized. Disabilities and their suspected causes were listed. Fannie Hickok lost most of her hearing after being kicked by a horse; Lucy Lumpkin was deaf-mute, as were her father and four brothers. The lives of mental patients were likewise recorded in detail. Sarah Davis and Mary Collins were both confined to locked cells at Western Lunatic Asylum; Mary was also restrained in a straitjacket.

In 1890, a special census of Union veterans and widows was taken, providing details about women's lives in the postwar South. Mary Jennings, the widow of William Jennings, lived in James City County; she told the census taker that her husband had been a private in the Illinois Infantry, but could not recall any more details of his military service. "This woman," he remarked on the schedule, "does not know anything."

Church Records

Women comprised the majority of church members in Virginia, and proved to be energetic volunteers and able fundraisers. Women raised money for orphanages, organized Sunday school picnics, and supported female missionaries. Minutes kept by the Dorcas Society at Court Street Methodist Church in Lynchburg, for example, detail home missionary work, listing members, contributions, and the names of poor children clothed by the group. At Beulah Baptist Church in King William County, members of the Ladies Missionary Society plied their needles to clothe the poor, and also outfitted the church's preachers and the county's Confederate soldiers, being careful (at their pastor's warning) not to overstep "the bounds allotted to our sex." Other churches with active women's groups include First Baptist Church (Hillsville), the Ladies' Foreign Missionary Union (Richmond City), Liberty Baptist Church (Appomattox County), and the Seventh Street Christian Church (Richmond City). Additional records, including those for Monthly Meetings of Women Friends, are listed in *A Guide to Church Records in the Library of Virginia* and the online Archives and Manuscripts catalog.

Confederate Pensions

The General Assembly provided financial assistance for Confederate veterans and their families, passing pension acts in 1888, 1900, and 1902, and a series of supplementary acts between 1903 and 1934. The 1888 act provided pensions to Confederate soldiers, sailors, and marines disabled in action and to the widows of those killed in action. Subsequent acts broadened the coverage to include all veterans, their widows, and their unmarried or widowed daughters and sisters. Pensions assisted women like Bath County resident Nancy Hodge. After her husband, Joseph, was killed in a lumbering accident in 1895, she received \$75 a year. Applications are indexed and are available on microfilm. A searchable database and digital images are also available on the Library's Web site.

Legislative Petitions

Legislative petitions (1776–1865) are arranged alphabetically by county or city of origin, and chronologically within the locality. Petitioners often sought legislative action, financial aid, and divorce. Melinda Jones submitted a petition from Richmond in 1850. Her husband had coerced her into an acting career, fathered two daughters by her, and then left for Europe. "Alone, unaided, and uncheered by a single ray of hope for the future," Melinda saw her marriage as nothing more than "a torturing tie." After reviewing her moving testimony, the General Assembly approved her request.

Some women requested exemption from the 1806 law requiring free blacks to leave the state. In 1819, Richmond resident Judith Hope, the daughter of a free black barber, sought permission to remain in Virginia. Other women asked for financial assistance after their husbands were killed or disabled in military service. Norfolk resident Mary Webley received compensation herself in 1776, after her leg was broken by a cannonball fired from a British warship.

Legislative petitions are available on microfilm. A searchable database and digital images of Early Virginia Religious Petitions, 1774–1802, are available on the Library's Web site. Early petitions have also been abstracted in W. Randolph Church, *Virginia Legislative Petitions, 1776–1782*.

Letters to the Governor

Includes letters received, 1776–1906; and letters received and sent, 1906–. Letters often request pardons, appointments to office, or assistance. In November 1895, for example, a group of twenty-four "women of

earnest purpose” wrote to Gov. Charles T. O’Ferrall requesting admission to the University of Virginia. The governor (along with the school’s faculty and board of visitors) was unsympathetic; the University did not become fully coeducational until 1970.

A searchable database and digital images of Governor’s Letters Received, 1776–1784, are available on the Library’s Web site. For additional information, see Research Note Number 11.

Local Records

Women appear in county and city records, including wills, deeds, order books, and marriages. While single women and widows could own property on the same terms as men, marriage brought an automatic transfer of the woman’s property rights to her husband. In 1877, an Act of the Assembly secured the real and personal property acquired by women before or after their marriage. Thereafter, a husband could not dispose of his wife’s property or use it to settle his debts; it remained “her sole and separate estate.”

Local records may also include separation agreements. An agreement struck between Elizabeth Blaetterman and her husband, George, in 1840 appears in Albemarle County Deed Book 38: 179–182. A professor at the University of Virginia, Blaetterman had twice assaulted his wife in the street with a cowhide whip; once they separated, he relinquished his legal rights over her and her property “as if she were unmarried.”

Organization Records

Organization records include those of women’s clubs, memorial societies, and hereditary organizations. In Richmond, women organized the Equal Suffrage League in 1909; a rich collection of the league’s correspondence, minutes, and broadsides was deposited at the Library of Virginia in 1942 by its secretary, Ida Mae Thompson. Papers and records of the League of Women Voters are also part of the Library’s collection, as are the papers of the Virginia Equal Rights Ratification Council.

Personal Papers

The personal papers collection includes diaries, letters, and travelers’ accounts dating from the eighteenth century to the twentieth. Some diaries, like those of Jane T. Simpson of Petersburg, describe travel abroad, while others, like the 1850 diary of Alexandria resident Ella H. Fowle, document events closer to home. Civil War diarists Harriette Cary and Margaret Muse Pennypaker described the grim realities of Union occupation. Other women’s papers recorded family visits (Hannah Moffett King), recipes (Martha Burke Jones Eppes), religious life (Anna Maria Weisiger), civic involvement (Mary-Cooke Branch Munford), and political activism (Zelda Kingoff Nordlinger and Carroll Kem Shackelford). Student life is documented in workbooks (Elizabeth Harris Callaway and Emily Columbia Covington). Other women left behind scrapbooks filled with newspaper clippings, poetry, and letters (Mary S. Armistead and Ellen Mordecai).

State Records

State records reveal a wealth of information on Virginia women. The minutes of the State Board of Charities and Corrections, 1908–1948, reflect the active role of women in social welfare, including sanatoriums, maternity hospitals, and orphanages. Records created by the Department of Education describe the examination and certification of teachers, while Reports of Instructional Personnel list the names of black and white teachers in Virginia, 1891–1984, along with the grade they were certified to teach. Records created by the State Board of Nursing include examination grades and questions, as well as listings of qualified nurses. Related records are listed in *A Guide to State Records in the Archives Branch, Virginia State Library* and the online Archives and Manuscripts catalog.

World War I

The Virginia War History Commission was established in 1919 to collect and publish information concerning the commonwealth's participation in World War I. The commission conducted a survey of veterans through the use of a printed questionnaire; a separate two-page form was used to survey nurses and clerks. These are available on microfilm; a searchable database and digital images are also available on the Library's Web site. Letters and diaries collected by the commission also include material on women's work.

Women's war experiences at home and abroad are highlighted in other archival records, including those of the Virginia Federation of Women's Clubs, the Equal Suffrage League, the WPA Life Histories Collection, and the personal papers of Margaret Kern and Mary-Cooke Branch Munford.

World War II

Women's wartime activities on the home front are documented in the records of women's clubs (such as the Virginia Federation of Women's Clubs). Other sources concerning women during the war include records of the Office of Civilian Defense and the World War II History Commission, which compiled a U.S.O. roll of service and collected photographs of Virginia clubs. Also of interest is the United States Army Signal Corps Photograph Collection, Hampton Roads Embarkation Series, 1942–1946. Many of the photographers (as well as the mechanics, clerks, medical personnel, and administrators) were women. A searchable database and digital images are available on the Library's Web site.

WPA Life Histories Collection

A collection of approximately 1,300 Work Projects Administration/Virginia Writers' Project life histories written between 1938 and 1941 details the struggle of women to support themselves and their families during the Depression. Interviewer Maude R. Chandler described the lives of two aspiring beauticians in Appalachia, while Essie Wade Smith chronicled the struggle of a battered mother of five. Another desperate woman reported her husband, a WPA laborer, for abandonment. A searchable database and digital images are available on the Library's Web site. Some of the life histories are included in *Talk About Trouble: A New Deal Portrait of Virginians in the Great Depression*, edited by Nancy J. Martin-Perdue and Charles L. Perdue Jr. (Chapel Hill, 1996) and *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, edited by Charles L. Perdue Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips (Charlottesville, 1976).

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A free informational pamphlet on genealogical research and a variety of research notes and topical bibliographies are available on request from the Library of Virginia, 800 E. Broad Street, Richmond, VA 23219. Visit the Library's Web site for digital collections and related archival publications.

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