

## Researching in the Archives Collections

The Library of Virginia was created by the General Assembly in 1823 to organize, care for, and manage the state's growing collection of books and official records. Today the Library houses more than ninety million manuscript items and a vast collection of materials on Virginia government, history, and culture. An experienced staff is available to provide advice and assistance in using these rich and varied collections. For more information on resources and publications, patrons may also explore the Library's Web site, where the Archives Research Notes series is available.

### What materials are available in the Archives Research Room?

Original materials served in the Archives Research Room include church records, genealogical notes and charts, Bible records, county and municipal records, state records, personal papers, business records, organization records, military records, and cemetery records. There is no comprehensive index to these holdings, but published and in-house guides to specific record groups are available, in addition to the online Archives and Manuscripts catalog. Researchers are required to fill out a registration form, present photo identification, and agree to follow rules governing the use of archival material. Photography is allowed only with prior permission.

Special rules are enforced in the Archives Research Room to preserve the documentary heritage of Virginia. Only portable computers, pencils, and loose-leaf paper may be used. Briefcases, handbags, outer jackets, and other personal items must be secured in a locker. To request materials, patrons must complete stack service request slips. The requested items are then retrieved from the stacks. Requests are accepted until 4:00 PM, and the room closes at 4:30 PM.

Patrons are limited to twenty-five copies a day. Some documents, depending on their condition, size, and other restrictions, may not be photocopied. (A detailed photocopy policy is available in the Archives Research Room.) Archival materials are fragile and irreplaceable, and the Code of Virginia governs their care and use.

### What resources are available for African American family research?

Handbooks for African American family research are available at the Library, including Paula K. Byers, ed., *African American Genealogical Sourcebook* (1995); Joan W. Peters, *Local Sources for African-American Family Historians: Using County Court Records and Census Returns* (1993); and Dee Woodtor, *Finding a Place Called Home: A Guide to African-American Genealogy and Historical Identity* (1999). Another useful source is Michael Plunkett, *Afro-American Sources in Virginia: A Guide to Manuscripts* (1990), also available online at [www.upress.virginia.edu/plunkett/mfp.html](http://www.upress.virginia.edu/plunkett/mfp.html). Researchers may wish to consult a variety of records, including vital statistics, census schedules, post-1865 tax lists, and county and city court records. Records for the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands concerning Virginia may be found on microfilm in the West Reading Room (miscellaneous reels 3840–3926), and Freedmen's Bank records (1864–1874) are available on CD. An in-house guide to Free Black Records is available in the Archives Research Room. Selected materials for African American family research are described in a pamphlet, *Resources for African American Genealogical Research—How to Begin*, available in the Library's reading rooms.

### Where can I find birth, death, and marriage records?

Early official records of births and deaths in Virginia are almost nonexistent, but such information can sometimes be located

in church registers, family Bibles, or county court records. Few marriage records prior to 1730 survive in parish registers or county court record books. As a rule, these records list only the names of the bride and groom, the names of the security, and the date issued.

Although an act passed in 1853 mandated that the state record vital statistics, birth and death records were not kept between 1896 and 1912. Several metropolitan areas continued to keep records of births and deaths after 1896. The cities of Lynchburg, Newport News, Norfolk, Petersburg, Portsmouth, Richmond, and Roanoke, and the county of Elizabeth City, kept records for all or part of the period between 1896 and 1912.

Microfilm copies of Bureau of Vital Statistics birth and death records (1853–1896) and marriage records (1853–1935) are available in the West Reading Room. Births and marriages are indexed. Deaths (1853–1896) are not indexed; however, an ongoing death records indexing project undertaken by the Virginia Genealogical Society and the Library has produced indexes for selected localities. A searchable database for the project is available on the Library's Web site. In addition, local registers of births, deaths, and marriages may be available on microfilm. Researchers may also wish to investigate the Library's rich collection of newspapers and consult Jordon R. Dodd, ed., *Virginia Marriages, Early to 1800* (1991).

The Library also holds microfilm copies of death certificates, 1912–1939. An index to these death certificates (1912–1954) is available on microfilm. For additional information, see Research Notes Number 2.

Certified copies of birth and death records are available *only* from the Office of Vital Records and Health Statistics, P.O. Box 1000, Richmond, VA 23218-1000. Details and forms are available at [www.vdh.state.va.us](http://www.vdh.state.va.us). Researchers who visit the Library can make copies from the birth and death registers on microfilm in the collection.

## **Is there an index to Virginia wills?**

Many extant Virginia wills prior to 1800 are indexed in Clayton Torrence's *Virginia Wills and Administrations 1623–1800*. Although there is no statewide index to wills, researchers may consult the guide to county and city records on microfilm for general indexes to wills for each county. In addition, a searchable database on the Library's Web site indexes early wills and administrations for fifty-three Virginia cities and counties. Researchers may also wish to consult *Index of Virginia Estates, 1800–1865*, an ongoing series compiled by Wesley E. Pippenger for the Virginia Genealogical Society.

## **Do you have church records?**

Church records can be located by using *A Guide to Church Records* and the online Archives and Manuscripts Catalog. Most of these records, some of which date back to the colonial period, are administrative and contain few references to births, deaths, and marriages. There is no master index to information recorded in the materials in this collection. Many early Episcopal church records have been lost, but all those known to have survived have been given to or copied for the Library. Denominations represented in the church records include Baptist, Christian (Disciples of Christ), Episcopal, Jewish, Lutheran and German Reformed, Methodist, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Society of Friends (Quakers), and Unitarian. Published church records can be located by searching the Library's online catalog.

## **Is there an index to Land Office patents and grants?**

Land Office patents and grants, including Northern Neck grants and surveys, are indexed by the name of the patentees or grantees. These indexes can be found in a card catalog and on microfilm in the West Reading Room. A searchable database and digital images are also available on the Library's Web site. To search for a patent or grant, it is necessary to have the name of the patentee or grantee, the county in which the land was located, and the approximate date of the document. Patent and grant books are located on microfilm in the West Reading Room. A helpful published source is the multi-volume

*Cavaliers and Pioneers: Abstracts of Virginia Land Patents and Grants, 1623–1776*. A supplement to *Cavaliers and Pioneers* contains abstracts of Northern Neck Grants, 1690–1692. Gertrude E. Gray's *Virginia Northern Neck Land Grants, 1694–1862* and Peggy S. Joyner's *Abstracts of Virginia's Northern Neck Warrants and Surveys* may also be of assistance. For additional information, see Research Notes Number 20 (Land Office) and 23 (Northern Neck).

## **My ancestor fought in the American Revolution. How can I find his records?**

Virginia played a pivotal role in the struggle for American independence from Great Britain. Virginia troops were engaged from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mississippi River and many citizens provided some form of military or public service. The records of service are numerous, varied, and sometimes complex, and most contain little information about the person's service and seldom contain genealogical data. There are existing records of Virginia Continental Line troops, the Virginia State Line, the Virginia State Navy, county militia, various independent units, and public service claims. Other important records include benefits in the form of land and pensions given by the Virginia and federal governments to veterans and their heirs.

Many of these sources are indexed in Hamilton J. Eckenrode, *Virginia Soldiers of the American Revolution* (2 vols.) and John H. Gwathmey, *Historical Register of Virginians in the Revolution, Soldiers, Sailors, and Marines, 1775–1783*. The organization and service of Virginia units are detailed in E. M. Sanchez-Saavedra, *A Guide to Virginia Military Organizations in the American Revolution*. For information on numerous additional sources, see Research Notes Number 8. Almost no records have survived for those men who served in county militia units.

The National Archives in Washington, D.C. holds many records of Continental Line service by Virginians and soldiers from other states. The Library holds some of these records on microfilm, including the Compiled Service Records of Virginia Soldiers Who Served in the American Army During the Revolutionary War and federal pension applications for Virginia soldiers. *Requests for copies should be directed to the National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. 20408*.

Some records relating to Revolutionary War service are available on the Library's Web site (check the site index under "military records.") Indexes and online images are available for bounty warrants, state pensions, and rejected claims. Indexes are available for Culpeper classes, public service claims, and Land Office military certificates.

## **My ancestor fought in the Civil War. How can I find his records?**

Most surviving Confederate War Department records are housed at the National Archives. The Library has microfilm copies of Compiled Service Records of Confederate Soldiers Who Served in Organizations from the State of Virginia in the West Reading Room, in addition to Compiled Service Records of Confederate General and Staff Officers and Non-Regimental Enlisted Men; Compiled Service Records of Confederate Soldiers Who Served in Organizations Raised Directly by the Confederate Government; Compiled Records Showing Service of Virginia Military Units in Confederate Organizations; and Compiled Service Records of Volunteer Union Soldiers Who Served in Organizations from the State of Virginia. *Requests for copies should be directed to the National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. 20408*.

Published sources may also be of assistance, including Janet B. Hewett, ed., *The Roster of Confederate Soldiers, 1861–1865*, and the Virginia Regimental History Series. Consult Henry Putney Beers, *Guide to the Archives of the Government of the Confederate States of America* (1968) for details on collections (including hospital records) held at the National Archives.

The General Assembly authorized payment of disability pensions to Virginia Confederate veterans who lost a limb or were seriously injured during the war. Subsequent acts provided pensions to Confederate soldiers, sailors, and marines disabled in action and the widows of those killed in action. Coverage ultimately included all veterans living in Virginia, their widows, and their unmarried or widowed daughters. These applications are available on microfilm in the West Reading Room. A searchable database of the applications, along with digital images, is available on the Library's Web site.

An in-house guide to Civil War materials in the personal papers and military records collections is available in the Archives Research Room, along with a finding aid for the state's Department of Confederate Military Records. For additional information, see Research Notes Number 14.

## **Do you have records for areas that were once part of Virginia?**

When the states of Kentucky and West Virginia were established in 1792 and 1863 respectively, local records were retained in the counties. Therefore, they are not part of the Archives collection. Selected microfilm of West Virginia county records has been purchased by the Friends of the Archives and is available in the West Reading Room. In-house and online guides to these county holdings are available.

The Archives does have some Virginia state records pertaining to these areas, including personal property tax lists, land grants, and legislative petitions. West Virginia land tax lists, 1782–1900, are available on microfilm; consult the guide in the West Reading Room for the exact dates available for each county. Published abstracts of some county records may also be available.

Fragmentary West Virginia vital statistics (1853–1863) are available on microfilm in the West Reading Room. These are arranged by county and are not indexed. An in-house guide is available for records relating to the district of West Augusta.

## **Do you have chancery records?**

A chancery cause is a case of equity where a judge, not a jury, determines the outcome of the case. These types of records are useful when researching genealogical information and land or estate divisions and may contain correspondence, lists of heirs, or vital statistics, among other items. Some of the more common types of chancery causes are the division of the estate of a person who died intestate, divorces, settlements of dissolved business partnerships, and resolution of land disputes. For more information, check the ongoing Chancery Records Index, available on the Library's Web site; the Archives staff can provide additional details on holdings. Research Note 22 offers helpful guidance in chancery research.

## **What Virginia counties have suffered records loss?**

Records for a number of Virginia counties have been lost through fire, war, and other disasters. The greatest losses occurred for the counties of Appomattox, Buchanan, Buckingham, Caroline, Charles City, Dinwiddie, Elizabeth City, Gloucester, Hanover, James City, King and Queen, King William, Mathews, Nansemond, New Kent, Nottoway, Prince George, Prince William, Rockingham, Stafford and Warwick. Other counties have suffered partial losses of records. The Burned Record County Database and Burned Jurisdiction Databases, both available on the Library's Web site, contain a growing collection of local court records, principally deeds and probate records, found while processing chancery cases and other local materials.

## **Reference Assistance**

Patrons may contact the Archives staff with questions about services, collections, and policies by telephone (804.692.3888) or e-mail (linked on the Library's Web site) from 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM, Monday through Saturday, excluding state holidays. The staff will provide information on the scope, availability, and arrangement of the collections; requesting copies of archival materials by mail; requesting copies of our publications; directions and guidance for planning a research trip to the Library; and using our online resources.

Revised by Jennifer Davis McDaid and the Archives Research Services staff.  
June 2008

