

Virginia Research: Four Centuries of History and Genealogy

17th-Century Research: Birth of a Colony

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History

The geography of Virginia has influenced its history by molding patterns of settlement and trade. The tidewater or coast area was settled first with subsequent settlement expanding into the Piedmont region, the Blue Ridge, and the Shenandoah Valley.

During the 17th century the coastal plain funneled explorers along the rivers draining into the Chesapeake Bay. The James river near the mouth of the Chesapeake was settled first. The area between the James and the York River to the north, is known as the Peninsula. The Middle Peninsula is between the York River and the Rappahannock to its north. And finally, a region prominently mentioned in Virginia records, the Northern Neck, is between the Rappahannock and Potomac Rivers.

Before Europeans arrived in Virginia, many indigenous groups called Virginia home. The Algonquin language group settled in the Chesapeake Bay region of Virginia and included the Powhatan and Nanticoke. The Iroquois language group, including the Cherokee, had a presence in southwestern Virginia. The Catawban language group appears to predominate in the piedmont and Blue Mountain Valley regions. This group includes the Saponi, Tutelo, and Monacan of Virginia.

Travel by the indigenous people was typically east/west until reaching the Great Valley, at which point travel goes north/south. There was also an important network of trails from what is now Petersburg, Virginia into the Carolinas. This route was known variously as the Occaneechi Path, the Warrior Path or the Catawba Road. It connected Coastal and Piedmont regions, including Chesapeake Bay, with Cherokee and other villages in the Carolinas. When considering how your ancestor may have moved throughout Virginia and further south, begin by looking for the native paths and roads.

[London Company](#)

The first charter issued in 1606 was intended to settle the coast of Virginia for Great Britain, develop goods for export, and provide a buffer with Spain. In 1607 Jamestown was founded with 104 boys and men. The 2nd charter in 1609 was intended to strengthen the governance of the settlement by appointing a single governor. But troubles persisted with the Winter starving time of 1609-1610. The colony shrank from 240 settlers in the fall of 1609 to 60 in the spring of 1610. The third charter was issued in 1612 and also marked the year that John Rolfe exported a few trial barrels of a sweet tobacco. 1619 saw a major reset



of Virginia Company including the establishment of the House of Burgess, and the headright system. But despite all efforts, in 1624, the Virginia Company failed, and Virginia became a crown colony.

Colonial Government

In 1619, Governor George Yeardley established a General Assembly with two representatives from each of the colony's eleven settlements. The Assembly immediately began issuing laws and regulations on land, tobacco, and trade based on English parliamentary law. The Church of England was established as the official church of the colony. In 1643, Governor Berkeley split the Assembly into the House of Burgesses (elected) and the Governor's Council (appointed).

Counties and county courts were established in 1634 as the governmental units to manage land, tax and probate records.

Anglican parishes assumed responsibility for registering births, marriages and deaths, and levying taxes to pay for several important functions such as poor relief and road building and maintenance.

Published Resources

Finding Aids

Virginia Historical Index, also known as the Swem Index, is a valuable resource for 17th century Virginia research. It indexes all pre-1930 articles from five publications and two sets of governmental records, including Hening's *Statutes at Large* of Virginia laws. Peter Coldham worked extensively with English records to compile lists of mostly poor immigrants to the colonies.

Genealogies

Adventurers of Purse and Person by Frank Dorman presents up to six generation genealogies of the individuals identified by the 1624/5 muster. *The Genealogies of Virginia Families* are compilations of articles from the journals of the *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, the *William and Mary College Quarterly*, and *Tyler's Quarterly Historical and Genealogical Magazine*.

Record Compilations

When gentry from England died in Virginia, their estates were often probated in England. Check one of several probate compilations for your ancestor: Coldham's *English Estates of American Colonists*, Withington's *Virginia Gleanings in England*, and Torrence's *Virginia Wills and Administrations 1632-1800*.

The Library of Virginia's Colonial Records Project is a particularly valuable collection for family historians researching the 17th century. The project was established to find records related to Virginia in Britain, France, and Ireland. The collection includes correspondence between British officials and colonial officers, customs records, business records, claims of British merchants concerning Virginia stores, log

books, as well as ships' cargo lists.

Records

First, there are some scattered very early censuses taken by the Virginia Company. For church records you may find birth, marriage and death registers or gravestone markers. Land records are a key source of information for early Virginia and include grants and deeds. In some areas you will find probate records including wills, inventories and guardianships. And some other types of court records have survived as well as records of the Virginia Company and the journals of the House of Burgesses.

Numerous challenges face the family historian seeking original 17th century Virginia records. Perhaps the biggest challenge may be record loss due to fire, water, mold, and, of course, war. There are also jurisdictional changes to trip up family historians. Borders changed frequently in the 17th century so you will need to consult a source such as the Newberry Library's Atlas of Historical County Boundaries. And in conjunction with maps, you need to consult sources such as the FamilySearch research wiki on when you can find the earliest type of record for your ancestor's location.

The table below shows the extent of record loss in early Virginia Counties.

County	Est	Record Loss
Accomack	1633	No fires, but water and pest
Charles City	1634	1861-1865
Elizabeth City	1634	1812, 1861-1865
Essex	1692	None known
Gloucester	1651	Fires 1820 and 1865
Henrico	1634	Almost all prior to 1677 missing
Isle of Wight	1634	Loose papers prior to 1783
James City	1634	1865 fire
King and Queen	1691	1828, 1833, 1864 fires
Lancaster	1651	None known
Middlesex	1674	Loose papers lost in 1865
Nansemond	1637	1734, 1779 and 1866
New Kent	1654	1787 Fire destroyed most colonial records
Upper and Lower Norfolk	1647	Extinct Counties
Northampton	1634	None known
Northumberland	1648	Some records lost in fire 1710
Princess Anne	1691	Records at Independent City Courthouse in Virginia Beach
Richmond	1692	Many lost records for "unknown reasons"
Stafford	1664	1861-1865
Surrey	1652	Most loose papers prior to 1806
Westmoreland	1653	Wills from 1600, also loose papers burned in Rev War

York	1643	Most loose papers prior to Rev War
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Strategies

Your first strategy is to become as familiar as possible with the extensive resources of the Library of Virginia. Although access to some materials may be restricted to Virginia residents, much useful and valuable material is online.

If the county you are researching has experienced significant record loss, consider using the cluster research approach to your problem. This involves identifying the family, friends, associates and neighbors of your ancestor (their FAN club). And researching the FAN club may yield clues about your ancestor.

Resources

Eric G. Grundset, *Researching in the States: Virginia, 3rd edition* (Arlington, VA: NGS: 2014)

Library of Virginia. *Guide to published and digital resources. Jamestown and Seventeenth-Century Virginia.* <https://lva-virginia.libguides.com/jamestown>

Library of Virginia. *Genealogical Records at the Library of Virginia*
<https://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/guides/generesearch.pdf>

Also, see below – Library of Virginia Online Resources

History

Indigenous Virginians

Egloff, Keith, and Deborah Woodward. *First People: The Early Indians of Virginia.* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2006).

Gleach, Frederic W. *Powhatan's World and Colonial Virginia: A Conflict of Cultures.* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).

Rountree, Helen C., and E. Randolph Turner. *Before and After Jamestown: Virginia's Powhatans and Their Predecessors.* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2002).

Virginia Company

Virginia Company of London, *Records of the Virginia Company of London* (Washington DC: GPD 1906-35, F 229.V86, digitized by LOC <https://www.loc.gov/item/06035006/>)

Library of Virginia. Headrights (VA-NOTES).
https://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/guides/va4_headrights.htm

Finding Aids

Coldham, Peter Wilson, *The Complete Book of Emigrants in Bondage, 1614-1775* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company 1988).

Hotten, John Camden, *The Original Lists of Persons of Quality, 1600 to 1700* (Boston: NEHGS reprint 2012).

Robert Hume, *Early Child Immigrants to Virginia 1619-1642* (Baltimore: Magna Carta Book Company, 1986)

Published Resources

Compiled Genealogies

John Frederick Dorman, *Adventurers of Purse and Person*, 4th ed. (Baltimore, Md.: Genealogical Pub. Co., 2004-2007).

Martha W. McCartney, *Virginia Immigrants and Adventurers: A Biographical Dictionary, 1607-1635* (Baltimore Md.: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2007).

Probate

English Estates of American Colonists. *American Wills and Administrations in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, 1610-1699*

William Lindsay Hopkins, *Some Wills from the Burned Counties of Virginia* (Richmond: Williams Hopkins, 1987)

Records

Census

William Thorndale, "Virginia census of May 1619," *Magazine of Virginia Genealogy*. Richmond, VA. Volume 33, Number 3 (Summer 1995), pages [155]-170; Volume 51, Number 2 (May 2013), pages 119-129.

Virginia. General Assembly, *Colonial records of Virginia*, available at Internet Archive
<http://archive.org/details/colonialrecords00virg/page/24/mode/2up>

Virtual Jamestown, Censuses http://www.virtualjamestown.org/census_main.html

Church

The vestry book and register of St. Peter's Parish, New Kent and James City Counties, Virginia, 1684-1786
Southern Virginia 1964

Charles Francis Cocke, *Parish Lines: Diocese of Virginia* (Richmond: VA State Library, 1967)

Charles Francis Cocke, *Parish lines, Diocese of Southwestern Virginia* (Richmond, Va. : Virginia State Library, 1960)

Charles Francis Cocke, *Parish lines, Diocese of Southern Virginia* (Richmond, Va. : Virginia State Library, 1964)

Jewell T Clark and Elizabeth T. Long. *A Guide to Church Records in the Library of Virginia*. (Richmond, Va.: 2002)

Elizabeth Terry Long, "Genealogical Research in Virginia Church Records," *Virginia Genealogical Society Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (1980):pages 60-69

Probate

Clayton Torrence, *Virginia wills and administrations, 1632-1800* (Richmond: William Bryd Press, 1932)

See

<https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/371231?availability=Family%20History%20Library>.

See below – Library of Virginia Online Resources

Land

Nell Marion Nugent, *Cavaliers and pioneers; abstracts of Virginia land patents and grants, 1623-1800*. Vol 1-7 (Richmond : Press of the Dietz Print Co., 1934-)

See below – Library of Virginia Online Resources

Court Records

Beverly Fleet, *Virginia Colonial Abstracts, Vols 1 -3* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1988). Original 34 volumes online at FamilySearch.org

<https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/1949959?availability=Family%20History%20Library>

Journals of the House of Burgesses of Virginia 1619-1658/59.

<https://www.ancestraltrackers.net/va/resources/journal-house-burgesses-v1.pdf>

William Waller Hening. *The statutes at large, being a collection of all the laws of Virginia from the first session of the legislature in the year 1619 - v. 1. 1619-1660 -- v. 2. 1660-1682 -- v. 3. 1684-1710*. At *FamilySearch.org*.

<https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/354123?availability=Family%20History%20Library>

Library of Virginia Online Resources

Library of Virginia, “Genealogical Records at the Library of Virginia”

<https://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/guides/generesearch.pdf>

Library of Virginia, “Research Guides and Indexes,” <https://lva-virginia.libguides.com/>

Library of Virginia, “Virginia Land Patents and Grants,” <https://lva-virginia.libguides.com/land-grants>

Library of Virginia, “Wills and Estate Records Index,” <https://lva-virginia.libguides.com/wills>.

Library of Virginia, “Lost Record Localities Digital Collection,”

<https://www.virginiamemory.com/collections/lost>

Library of Virginia, “Virginia Colonial Records Project,” <https://lva-virginia.libguides.com/vcrp>

Library of Virginia *Historic Virginia Documents*. Documents related to Virginia history, from the 16th century to the present. <https://lva-virginia.libguides.com/c.php?g=1036598&p=7515229>

Library of Virginia, “Best Sources for Virginia Research by Time Period,”

<https://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/guides/time.htm>