

RESEARCH GUIDE

VIRGINIA

by SHANNON COMBS-BENNETT



AS THE OLDEST PERMANENT ENGLISH SETTLEMENT in North America, Virginia has a long history. It also has a rich trove of genealogical records to explore.

Read on for more on the history of Virginia, plus what records you can find there.

TIDEWATER HISTORY

When European settlers arrived on the shores of the James River, numerous Native American tribes already lived in the Tidewater area. At the time of the English landing in Cape Henry, the Indigenous population in the area was estimated at 15,000 people, notably the tribes of the Powhatan Confederacy (Powhatan, Arrohateck, Appamattuck Pamunkey, Mattaponi and more), the Monocan, and the Manahoac.

Virginia was a place of many firsts. Seeking fortune, the Virginia Company founded the first permanent English settlement in North America, Jamestown, in 1607. Despite early setbacks—notably, harsh winters and periods of starvation—the colony eventually prospered, mainly due to the cultivation of tobacco. Jamestown was also the first place in the mainland American colonies to introduce slavery, with the first ship carrying enslaved Africans arriving in nearby Hampton in 1619.

By 1624, Virginia as a whole was the first royal colony, with claimed territory extending west into modern Kentucky. Jamestown was the initial capital, followed by Williamsburg in 1699 and Richmond in 1780.

As European settlers pushed west, their contact with Native Americans grew. Records from the era survive in the form of petitions from tribes to the governors of Virginia, as well as personal papers, journals and histories written by settlers. The Virginia Colonial

Records Project <va-virginia.libguides.com/vcrp> is working to inventory Colonial-era records (including those that survive of colonists' dealings with Native Americans) that are held in English repositories.

Record loss, in general, is a challenge for Virginia research. Of the 95 current-day counties in the state, 44 are considered “burned” by the Library of Virginia because of major record loss: hurricanes, flooding, and (of course) burned courthouses. You'll need patience and diligence to reconstruct families from these places.

The English in Virginia were followed by French Huguenots escaping religious persecution in France. They founded Manakintown in 1702 just east of present-day Virginia, but the town soon petered out. Their influence remains in French surnames in surrounding English settlements.

Germans, too, came to the colony, in several waves. “Germanna,” founded near modern Culpeper in the early 1700s, was the first permanent German settlement in Virginia <www.germanna.org/list-of-original-germanna-settlers>. Later immigrants moved west to the Shenandoah Valley and north to nearby Pennsylvania.

As the most populous of the Thirteen Colonies, Virginia was key in the Revolutionary era. Nathaniel Bacon led an armed peasant's revolt against Virginia's governor in 1676, a rallying call for future self-government. The British surrendered to Continental forces at Yorktown, Va., a century later in 1781.

Virginia also had considerable political power. Virginian Thomas Jefferson penned the Declaration of Independence, and Virginia delegates were influential in both the Continental Congress and the Constitutional Convention. George Washington and three of the other first five presidents were

FAST FACTS

STATEHOOD:
1788

FIRST FEDERAL CENSUS:
1790

BIRTH AND DEATH RECORDS BEGIN:
1853 (county); 1912 (state)

MARRIAGE RECORDS BEGIN:
1600s (local); 1853 (county/state)

CONTACT FOR VITAL RECORDS:
VA Dept. of Health,
Office of Vital Records

Virginians, earning the state the moniker “Mother of Presidents.” Virginia was the 10th state to ratify the Constitution in 1788.

Slavery played a critical role in Virginia’s economy, from (as previously stated) its earliest settlement to the end of the Civil War. Those researching enslaved persons can look to diaries, journals, correspondence and other objects passed through the enslaver’s family. Many families are realizing the importance of these items and donating them to repositories.

Given its reliance on slavery, Virginia seceded from the Union in 1861. Several major battles—Bull Run, Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville, to name a few—took place in Virginia, and Richmond served as the Confederacy’s capital. Its western counties (which had had longstanding political and economic differences from the rest of the state) voted to secede in 1863, forming West Virginia. Virginian Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox Court House, and the state formally rejoined the Union in 1870.

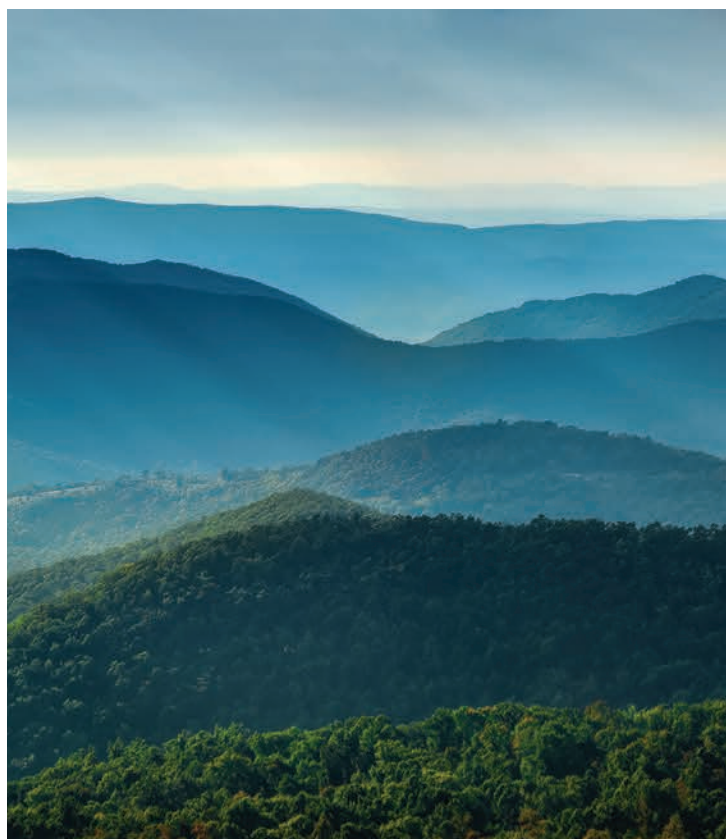
Of note to researchers: In addition to counties, Virginia’s government has also designated some locales as independent cities. For record-keeping, tax, and census purposes, these cities are equivalent to counties, and generally have documents organized separately from the surrounding counties.

A quick overview of Virginia’s diverse geography may also be helpful. Initial European settlement was in the Tidewater coastal plain in the east along Chesapeake Bay, flanked to the west by the hills of the Piedmont. Farther west are the Blue Ridge Mountains (part of the Appalachians) and the Shenandoah Valley.

OLD DOMINION VITALS

Some Virginia government bodies required birth and death registration as early as the 1600s. But many of these early vital records (kept by churches) no longer exist, and coverage varies by parish. Record-keeping fell to individual families after the Revolution and well into the 19th century.

In 1853, Virginia was among the first states to enact laws requiring vital registration. These were kept by the county, and the Library of Virginia has collected microfilm copies of 1853–1896 birth, death and marriage <www.vdh.virginia.gov/vital-records/genealogy>. The library has indexes for



some of the records in its collection <va-virginia.libguides.com>. Coverage lapses after 1896 and before 1912, when statewide registration was re-instituted.

Marriages were recorded earlier, with marriage bonds required by law from 1661. Unfortunately, these are also difficult to find, though they include the names of the bride and groom, names of the “security,” and when the bond was issued. Virginia directed ministers to report marriages to county clerks beginning in 1780.

The state department of health’s vital records office has jurisdiction over vital events that occurred from 1912 (birth and death) or 1936 (marriage) to the present. Ancestry.com hosts indexes to the department of health’s records; search them all at once at <www.ancestry.com/collections/search/va/doh>. Copies of birth records less than 100 years old and

GERRY/ADOBE STOCK

TIMELINE

1607

Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement in North America, is founded

1619

The first ship carrying African slaves to the modern United States arrives at Hampton, Va.

1624

King James I makes Virginia the first royal colony

1676

Colonists stage an armed revolt against Virginia’s governor in “Bacon’s Rebellion”

1788

Virginia is the 10th state to ratify the Constitution



marriage, death and divorce records less than 25 years old are restricted only to immediate family members.

Those researching African American ancestors who were enslaved can use FamilySearch's "Virginia, Slave Birth Index" <www.familysearch.org/search/collection/3326815>, which covers 1853 to 1866 and was compiled by the Works Progress Administration. Details include the names of the enslaver, the enslaved person, and the child's mother, as well as the date and place of birth. Also: Among the Freedmen's Bureau records are cohabitation records, which documented marriages between free African Americans in a time when the civil government didn't recognize the unions. Find documents at <www.virginiamemory.com/collections/collections_a_to_z>, under "Cohabitation Registers."

COUNTING VIRGINIANS

As one of the original 13 states, Virginia was included in every decennial US federal census, dating back to 1790. Federal censuses are widely available on sites like FamilySearch <www.familysearch.org>, Ancestry.com <www.ancestry.com> and MyHeritage <www.myheritage.com>.

Note that the 1890 census and Virginia's portion of the 1790 and 1800 censuses have been lost. Tax lists taken in the 1780s can serve as partial substitutes for the latter, with a notable publication being *The 1787 Census of Virginia* (Genealogical Books in Print).

Virginia didn't take any of its own state censuses. But the colony was enumerated in 1624 and 1625. The 1625 census has been published in *Adventurers of Purse and Person, Virginia, 1607-1625* (Genealogical Publishing Company).

1790

Virginia and Maryland each contribute land to the District of Columbia; in 1847, Congress returns Virginia's land

1861

Virginia secedes from the Union during the Civil War; Richmond is the Confederacy's capital

1863

Several counties vote to secede from Virginia and remain in the Union, forming West Virginia

1880

Dickenson County forms from Buchanan, Russell and Wise Counties, the last major change to intercounty borders

1902

The new state constitution allows cities to become independent from counties

TOOLKIT

Websites

Archival Resources of the Virginias <arvasarchive.org>

Cyndi's List: Virginia <www.cyndislist.com/us/va>

FamilySearch Research Wiki: Virginia <www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Virginia,_United_States_Genealogy>

Linkpendium: Virginia <www.linkpendium.com/va-genealogy>

VAGenWeb <www.vagenweb.org>

Virginia Memory <www.virginiamemory.com>

Virtual Jamestown <www.virtualjamestown.org>

Publications

Adventures of Purse and Person: Virginia, 1607–1624/5 by John Frederick Dorman (Genealogical Publishing Co.)

Calendar of Virginia State Papers, 11 volumes (1652–1869) by William Pitt Palmer (Kraus Reprint)

Hening's Statutes at Large, 13 volumes (1619–1792) by William Waller Hening (University Press of Virginia)

The Magazine of Virginia Genealogy (Virginia Genealogical Society)

Virginia Magazine of History and Biography (Virginia Museum of History & Culture)

Archives & Organizations

Colonial Williamsburg, John D. Rockefeller Jr. Library <www.colonialwilliamsburg.org/learn/research-and-education>

Library of Virginia <www.lva.virginia.gov>

The National Archives at Philadelphia <www.archives.gov/philadelphia>

Thomas Balch Library, Leesburg <www.leesburgva.gov/departments/thomas-balch-library>

Virginia's Academic Library Consortium <www.vivalib.org/viva/homepage>

Virginia Department of Historic Resources <www.dhr.virginia.gov/archive>

Virginia Museum of History and Culture (formerly Virginia Historical Society) <www.virginiahistory.org>

OTHER RECORDS

Find your Virginia ancestors in other documents, such as these.

- **Church Records:** The Anglican Church/Church of England was the established church of Virginia prior to the Revolutionary War (after which it became known as the Episcopal Church). Parish registers documented births, deaths and marriages even before civil registration, but records survive only sporadically. Non-Anglican congregations (such as Jews, Quakers, Baptists, and Lutherans) were not required by law to record births, deaths and marriages, so that documentation is also hit or miss. The Library of Virginia published *A Guide to Church Records in the Library of Virginia*, available for purchase or via interlibrary loan. Some entries date to 1647, and include social and family information about the parish.

- **Tax Records:** Virginia began recording statewide land and personal taxes in 1782, administered by counties. Their timing makes these tax records excellent substitutes for missing censuses or wills. The Library of Virginia has microfilmed copies of tax records from 1782 to the 1920s. Colonial tax records include poll taxes, which inventory tax-eligible “tithables” (including enslaved persons). The Library of Virginia has extant poll lists for 35-plus counties. Early records may report monetary values in British currency (pounds, shillings and pence) rather than US dollars and cents.

- **Military Records:** Colonial-era records are limited, but have been compiled and published in books such as *Hening's Statutes at Large* (University of Virginia Press) and *Virginia Colonial Militia, 1651–1776* by William Armstrong Crozier (Genealogical Publishing Company). Revolutionary War service is best documented in applications for bounty land and pensions, held by the National Archives and indexed at FamilySearch <www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1417475>. Compiled military service records (CMSRs) for Civil War service were created by the National Archives; the Library of Virginia has copies for servicemen from that state.

- **Chancery Records:** Virginia Memory has compiled an index of records from chancery courts <www.virginiamemory.com/collections/chancery>, cases that involved equity: estate division, the dissolution of business partnerships, land disputes and so on. Note that chancery courts are distinct from courts of common law.

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