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PRINCE WILLIAM COUNTY GENEALOGY

The following remarks are taken from the presentation on research in Prince William Co., Virginia, delivered by Mr. Donald L. Wilson of Centreville, Va., at the Conference held by the Virginia Genealogical Society, March 10, 1984, and they are printed here with Mr. Wilson's kind permission.

The earliest colonial settlers of what would become Prince William County (PWC) arrived about 1651. Before that county's government was organized in 1731, these early settlers would have been living within the jurisdiction of one or more of the following counties: Northumberland, Westmoreland, Stafford, Lancaster, Old Rappahannock, King George, or Richmond. Many PWC records created prior to the Civil War have been lost or destroyed, including all marriage records prior to 1854, many wills and deeds, and almost all church records. The court house, which was in Brentsville at the time of the War, was long occupied by Federal troops. Records were vandalized during that period, and others, perhaps, were stolen or destroyed. Several record books and groups of papers have been returned during the 20th century from northern states, and others may subsequently come to light.

Because of missing records and because existing records are not well indexed, research in PWC can be difficult and time-consuming. One starting point is the use of census substitutes to pinpoint whether a person was living in PWC in a given year. Rent rolls, and lists of tithables and taxpayers exist for the following years: 1723 and 1724 (Stafford Co.), 1737, 1738, 1741, 1751-1779 (most years), and 1782-1861. The earlier lists tend to be limited in their coverage. Once placed in the county at an approximate date, an ancestor is more easily located in the existing PWC records.

Early vital records are very scarce. There are no known registers for either parish of PWC, Hamilton nor Dettingen. The Dettingen vestry book has been published, however: Records of Dettingen Parish (1976). This includes the vestry book, 1745-1785, the minutes of overseers of the poor, 1788-1802, and indentures, 1749-1782. These indentures sometimes contain evidence of age. PWC has voter registration lists beginning about 1900, and these are sometimes helpful in establishing ages of people born around 1820-1840.

There are many gaps in probate material. Wills have been lost for the years 1731-1734 and 1744-1778, and several remaining books are mutilated. J. F. Dorman has published the PWC Will Book C, 1734-1744 (1956), and the "PWC Order Book, 1759-1761" appeared in The Virginia Genealogist (1975-1980). A recent addition to this material is June Johnson's PWC Bond Book, 1753-1782 (1982).

Land records are far from complete, with many gaps before 1865. A surviving index M-Z, 1731-1827, offers some clues. June Johnson has published PWC Deed Books A & B, 1731-1735 (1982).

There are several organizations representing the county which can be helpful. The PWC Genealogical Society, P. O. Box 2019, Manassas, VA 22110, offers membership at \$10 annually. The Society publishes a monthly Newsletter. The PWC Historical Commission, 9258 Lee Ave., Manassas (22110) recently issued Prince William, a Past to Preserve (1982). The Virginiana Collection, PWC Library, 8601 Mathis Ave., Manassas (22110), should not be overlooked. When time permits, both the Society and the Library will respond to requests for information by mail, if to do so requires no actual research. A SASE should always be included, and questions should be brief and simple.

