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GENEALOGICAL RESEARCH IN THE RECORDS OF ALEXANDRIA CITY AND ARLINGTON COUNTY

The following remarks are taken from the presentation on research in the records of Alexandria City and Arlington County delivered by Suzanne Smith Ray at the Conference held by the Virginia Genealogical Society, March 10, 1984. They are printed here with Mrs. Ray's kind permission.

Because of their unique history, Arlington Co. and the City of Alexandria are two of the most difficult Virginia localities in which to do research. Their short-lived status as part of the District of Columbia makes them historically and judicially different from the rest of the Commonwealth.

In 1789 Virginia offered to cede ten square miles of land to the United States for a permanent seat of government, and what was to become part of the District of Columbia was set aside for that purpose in 1791. Federal offices were moved there in 1801, and, concurrently, Virginia's part of the District became known as Alexandria County. Virginians became, however, unhappy with their status in the District, and Congress finally receded the area to the Commonwealth in 1846. After recession, Alexandria Co., Va., existed until 1920 when its name was changed to Arlington County.

During the time it was part of the District, Alexandria Co. had a federal circuit court, a Register of Wills, justices of the peace, and an Orphans' Court. Levy and Criminal courts were added later. Meanwhile, the Town of Alexandria's Hustings Court was abolished and its functions passed to the Alexandria District Court. After retrocession, the town was rechartered as a City and, in 1870, became an independent city, separate from Alexandria County. The City had its own Corporation Court after 1870 and was also the county seat of Alexandria Co., which had both a county court and a superior court (the Circuit Superior Court of Law and Chancery, later the Circuit Court). In 1904, Virginia's county courts ceased to exist, and their records passed to the custody of the Circuit Courts. The City's Corporation Court was equivalent to a Circuit Court after 1904.

The Virginia State Library holds many records from the City and County of Alexandria, including records from the District of Columbia period of their history. A few of the larger series include: records of the Circuit Court, District of Columbia, 1801-1846, containing deeds, wills, orders, Minute Books, Judgments and Executions, Fee Books, jury books, witness attendance records, and various dockets; records of the Criminal Court, District of Columbia, 1838-1846, containing Minute and judgment books; records of the District of Columbia Orphans' Court, containing Minutes, account books, and indentures; records of the Arlington County Court, 1847-1904, containing Dockets, minute books, and cases at law; records of the City of Alexandria, among them the Hustings Court records, 1779-1801, and the Court of Oyer and Terminer criminal proceedings, 1794-1800. There are still many records in the locality of origin, in a variety of repositories, and in the District itself. An exhaustive search will therefore require visits to record repositories in Northern Virginia and the District.

Those planning a visit to the Virginia State Library should remember that all the records in its collection have not been microfilmed and that, under provisions of the Public Records Act, original court documents generated in circuit courts or their predecessors are closed to public use. These records may be used only by patrons who gain written permission from the clerk or judge of the court in question.

