

# Preparing for a Research Trip to Virginia

Nicki Peak Birch, CG

In many ways, preparing to research in Virginia is no different than preparing for any research trip. Success depends upon doing as much advance planning as possible. This article walks through the process of creating a research plan and explains some of the unique aspects of Virginia research.



Reading Room, Virginia Museum of History & Culture (VMHC). Courtesy of VMHC.

Genealogists with Virginia ancestors may want to add research time before or after the National Genealogical Society's 2021 Family History Conference, scheduled to take place in May 2021 in Richmond, Virginia. The theme—Virginia: Deep Roots of a Nation—reflects the extensive history of Virginia and the location of the first permanent settlement of English-speaking people in North America.

## Preparation

To get the most out of a research trip, genealogists need to know what they have and what they want to find.

### 1. Formulate research questions

Decide which family lines to research and propose narrowly focused research questions for each. “Who was Elizabeth Smith of Fairfax County, Virginia?” is too broad. A better question is “Who was the father of Elizabeth Smith who married

John Jones in Fairfax County on 20 June 1845?” This question identifies a specific Elizabeth Smith who cannot be confused with other women of the same name. Focused research is more likely to find the desired information.

### 2. Consolidate information

Review the information already known about an individual and family. An effective way to organize information is to create a timeline. Record the date of an event, the ancestor's age at the time, a description of the event, and the source of the information (don't forget this step!) in chronological order. For example, list when Elizabeth Smith was born, where she lived, when she married, when her children were born, with whom she associated, when she died, and so on. Follow the ancestor through every census decade, if possible. What information is missing—birth, marriage, residences, children, death? Note any inconsistencies or unreliable information.

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**Nicki Peak Birch, CG**, has been a resident of Virginia for forty-five years and a genealogical researcher for forty. She has an MBA in operations research from American University. She is currently vice president of the Virginia Genealogical Society, secretary of the National Capital Area Chapter of APG, and the national presiding clerk [president] of the National Society Descendants of Early Quakers.



| A            | B                           | C   | D  | E   |
|--------------|-----------------------------|---|--|---|
| Date         | Location                    | Event   | Comments   | Source  |
| 1808         | Albany, NY                  | BIRTH   |  | Maria's CW pension appl #381008, cert #372486   |
| bef 1829     |                             | marriage with Mary Morgan                         |  | Maria's CW pension appl #381008, cert #372486   |
| 1829-1830    |                             | birth of son                                      | age 16-17 when mother died   | "Horrible Murder," Catskill (NY) Democrat, 11 Feb 1846.   |
| 1836-1837    |                             | birth of daughter Charlotte E.                    | Married William Hall abt 1859 and gave affidavit for Maria's pension application                                   | Pension affidavits: age 53 on 11 Jan 1889; age 52 on 10 Aug 1889; living in W. Nassau, Rensselaer Co. |
| 846 - Feb 8  | Coxsackie Landing, Green Co | death of Mary Morgan Pangburn                     |  | "Horrible Murder," Catskill (NY) Democrat, 11 Feb 1846.   |
| 1846         |                             | arrested for death of wife but not convicted      |  | Maria's CW pension appl #381008, cert #372486   |
| 150 - Sep 23 | Auburn Prison, Cayuga Co    | census  | Joshua, 33, no occupation, b NY, burglary  | P. 3168 (stamped), line 41  |
| 160 - Feb 11 | Nassau, NY by Rev. Ambler   | marriage with Maria Christina (Myers) Emery       | Maria b. Sep 1830 in Copeck, NY; daughter of Henry Myers; illiterate   | Maria's CW pension appl #381008, cert #372486   |
| 1860         |                             | census  |  | not found; checked Nassau page by page.   |
| 861 - Dec 9  | Albany, NY                  | enlisted in Co. F, 18th Reg., NY State Volunteers | Age 54, b. Albany, to serve 2 yrs, employed as cook. Shoemaker.  | 1890 special census: Bath-on-the-Hudson, Rensselaer Co, ED 179, p.1, Maria Pangburn                   |
| 862 - Jul 18 | Harrison's Landing, VA      | discharged  |  | 1890 special census: Bath-on-the-Hudson, Rensselaer Co, ED 179, p.1, Maria Pangburn                   |
| 1865         |                             | state census                                      |  | not found   |
| 867 - Jan 4  |                             | birth of daughter Mary L.                         |  | Affadavit of Dr. Augustus Tollis in Maria's pension file gave month and year.                         |
| 1870 - Jan   |                             | birth of son David                                |  | see 1870 census   |
| 870 - Jul 12 | Nassau, Rensselaer Co       | census  | Joshua, 54 (b 1816), farm laborer; Marva, 38 (b 1832); Mary, 3; David, 6/12 b Jan. Parents can read but not write. | P. 51 (stamped 111), dw 452, fam 478, Joshua Pangburn   |
| 172 - May 27 | West Sand Lake, NY          | birth of daughter Grace Eleanora                  |  | Grace's death certificate; also Affidavit of Charlotte Hall in pension file dtd 11 Jan 1889.          |

Joshua Pangburn timeline, 1808-1882. Privately held by Nicki Peak Birch, CG, [address for private use.] Vienna, Virginia, 2020.

### 3. Pinpoint locations

If this is a new location for research, seek out locality guides to find and understand the area's records and their limitations. Locality guides at the national, state, county, and city level may provide useful information. A good place to start is the FamilySearch Research Wiki (<https://www.familysearch.org/wiki>). At the time of this writing, 4,094 FamilySearch Wiki articles mention Virginia. The Virginia Wiki page ([https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Virginia,\\_United\\_States\\_Genealogy](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Virginia,_United_States_Genealogy)) has links to articles and websites that assist with Virginia research.

Locate the residence of the individual on a map for the time period of interest. Maps with county borders show how close to other jurisdictions the ancestor lived, while topographic maps indicate the contours of the land. Both types can be useful in determining which church or courthouse the



Sketch of western Virginia and eastern West Virginia, between Staunton and Clarksburg, 1861. Library of Congress Map Collection (<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc/gmd/g388004s.cwh066>).

### 4. Create a to-do list for each question

Draft a separate to-do list for each research question, based on the repositories to be visited. Specify the time span to research and the spelling variations to consider. One timesaving suggestion: use the repository's online catalog ahead of time to create a list of source citations to investigate onsite.

The to-do list should not be overly extensive, but should contain the books and record groups to be consulted as the first steps needed to resolve the research question. An effective list establishes a logical sequence and leaves room for flexibility during the actual research process. Clues found in the research may lead to other documents and resources, so it is important to analyze the material found during the research trip and not wait until returning home, when it will be too late to follow up on new clues onsite.

individual might have used—the legal one, the closest one, or the one easiest to reach. Thorough research means checking the records of all of them.

The Library of Congress (LOC) website (<https://www.loc.gov/maps>) has thousands of digitized maps, although these are a small percentage of its collection. David Rumsey, owner of one of the largest private map collections, has digitized over two-thirds of his 150,000 maps. Like LOC, his site (<https://www.davidrumsey.com/home>) is free to the public. Many states and universities have collections of maps, and a research trip to Virginia should include the Library of Virginia's extensive map collection (<https://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/guides/map>).





The Virginia Genealogical Society (<https://vgs.org>) offers resources that cover the entire state.

Membership, at forty dollars per year, provides the quarterly *Magazine of Virginia Genealogy* and the *Virginia Genealogical Society Newsletter*, plus discounts on Society books and publications.

The *Magazine of Virginia Genealogy* publishes material relating to Virginia, ranging from unpublished county material to personal papers to tax lists. Members may view volumes 1-58 on the website. Volumes 1-40 are available on *Ancestry* while volumes 1-50 are available on CD from the VGS store.

*The Virginia Genealogical Society Newsletter* publishes articles about research in Virginia counties and repositories. For example, the May 2017 issue describes the Swem Library at the College of William & Mary. Most issues from 1973 to date are available to members on the VGS website. *The VGS Newsletter* was the winner of the 2020 NGS Newsletter Competition in the Major Genealogical and/or Historical Societies category.

VGS databases available only to members include the Virginia Business Records Index, an ongoing project to index surviving Virginia business records from the colonial period to the Civil War.

Anyone can search the surname database, a list of surnames added by members, and contact members with shared surnames. The website also has a public page of resources, including a list of genealogical and historical societies throughout the state.

## Online research preparation

Advance online research helps identify the records needed onsite to answer research questions and saves precious time during a trip. To begin, view the records available at *Ancestry* and *FamilySearch*. Instead of using their general search capabilities, search their catalogs for the area of interest, then determine if any of the record groups are relevant for the time period.

For *Ancestry*, select Search from the top line, then Card Catalog. At this writing, the catalog contains over thirty-two thousand items. Drill down by typing the state or county and even the type of record desired. For example, "Virginia death" in the title box results in eight record collections, "Fairfax County" only two, while "Richmond" brings up twenty-nine, including items from Richmond, Ontario, and Richmond, Kentucky.

For *FamilySearch*, select Search, then Catalog. On the next screen, type the state and/or county in the Place field, from large to small; for example, enter "Virginia, Fairfax" and the system adds "United States." Specify just the county, and the system offers the names of the states with that county's name. Then select Online under Availability, to see a list of records digitized for that area.<sup>1</sup> Although many of these records are not indexed and thus not included in the Records search, they are available to browse.

The Library of Virginia contains the premier collection of Virginia materials, the largest anywhere. See "The Library of Virginia Welcomes Researchers" in this issue for information about its collections.<sup>2</sup> Check its online databases and research guides thoroughly before traveling to Virginia.

The USGenWeb Project's Virginia section (<http://usgenwebsites.org/vagenweb>) has useful information and links "with an emphasis on genealogy at the county level."<sup>3</sup>

Two other useful websites are Virginia Places (<http://virginiaplaces.org>) and Virginia Heritage (<https://vaheritage.org>). Virginia Places has links to Virginia maps and history, while Virginia Heritage provides information about manuscripts and archival materials in institutions throughout the state. Virginia Heritage constantly adds and updates its finding aids to make this site a useful tool "for discovering primary source materials documenting the history, culture, and people of Virginia."<sup>4</sup>

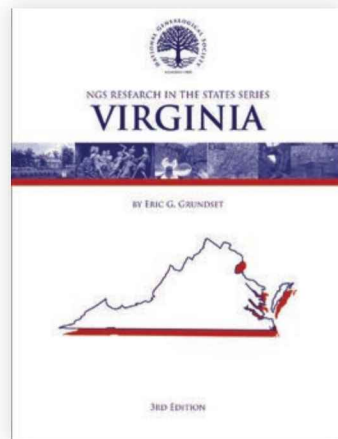
Websites cited in this article were viewed on 24 July 2020.

1. To see entries for all *FamilySearch* items, including published works and microfilms, select Any under Availability.
2. Virginia Dunn, "The Library of Virginia Welcomes Researchers," pages 19-24.
3. "VAGenWeb part of the USGenWeb," *VAGenWeb* (<http://usgenwebsites.org/vagenweb/index2.html>).
4. "About," *Virginia Heritage* (<https://vaheritage.org/about>).



## Unique characteristics of Virginia research

Eric Grundset's guide to Virginia research provides a comprehensive look at the state, its history, and genealogical resources.<sup>5</sup> For a list of all NGS Research in the States guides including one for West Virginia, see <https://www.ngsgenealogy.org/ris>. Researchers new to Virginia should be aware of some unusual aspects of Virginia genealogy.



### Vital records, or the lack thereof

During the colonial period, the Church of England was the official religion, and local parishes were responsible for maintaining accounts of births, marriages, and deaths. Few of these parish records survived, but those still extant have been published. Even after the Revolution, when Virginia was quick to impose personal property and land taxes, the state made no provision for recording births and deaths until 1853. Marriage bonds were maintained at the county level until statewide registration was required in 1853. The registration requirement was repealed in 1896 and not reinstated until 1912, although some local and city jurisdictions kept records during these years.

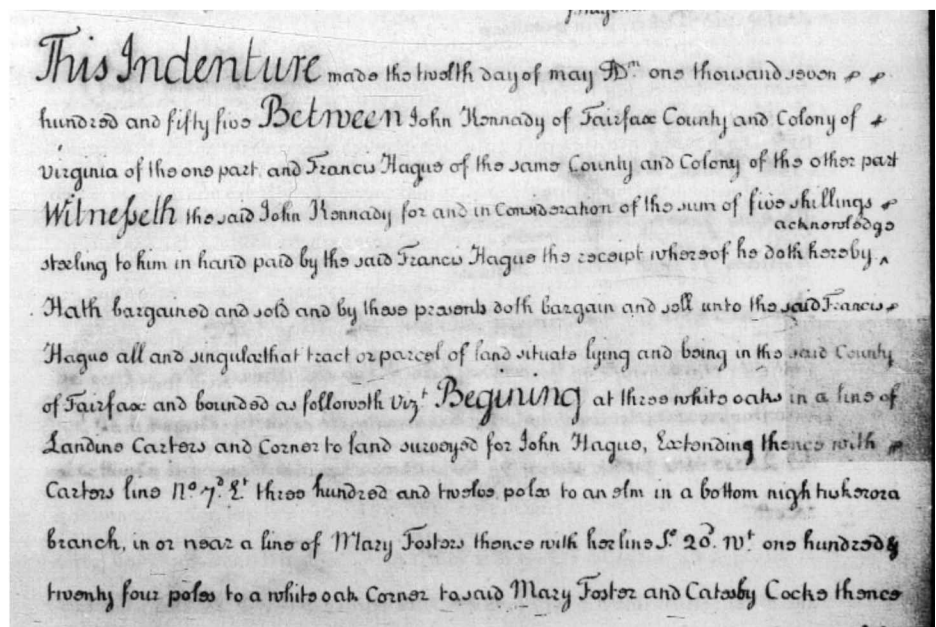
Virginia law restricts birth records for one hundred years and death, marriage, and divorce records for twenty-five years after the event. Only the General Assembly had the ability to grant divorces in Virginia until that body gave jurisdiction to the county courts in 1852. Virginia

began recording divorces in 1918 on a state-wide basis. Divorces granted by the General Assembly have been abstracted by Wesley Pippenger.<sup>6</sup>

An ongoing collaboration between Ancestry and the Virginia Department of Health has resulted in the digitization and indexing of more than sixteen million Virginia vital records.<sup>7</sup> Access is available at the Library of Virginia for free or on Ancestry by subscription.

### State-land state

As a state-land state, Virginia controlled and distributed its own land. Researchers accustomed to the western federal-land states may be surprised by the odd descriptions of their Virginia ancestors' land in deed records. This example shows the metes-and-bounds method: "Beginning at three white oaks in a line of Landins Carters... Extending thence with Carters line N<sup>o</sup> 7<sup>d</sup> E<sup>t</sup> three hundred and twelve poles to an elm in a bottom..."<sup>8</sup> A pole is sixteen and a half feet or one fourth of a chain. Needless to say, using trees and stakes to describe land boundaries led to many disputes between land owners.



Fairfax County, Virginia, Deed Book D:115, Kennady to Hague; digital images, FamilySearch (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-CS4V-Y33F-M>).

5. Eric G. Grundset, NGS Research in the States Series: *Virginia*, 3rd edition (Arlington, VA: National Genealogical Society, 2007).

6. Wesley E. Pippenger, *Connections and Separations: Divorce, Name Change and Other Genealogical Tidbits from the Acts of the Virginia General Assembly* (Westminster, MD: Willow Bend Books, 2000).

7. "Virginia, Birth Records, 1912-2015, Delayed Birth Records, 1721-1911" (<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/9277>). "Virginia, Marriage Records, 1936-2014" (<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/9279>). "Virginia, Death Records, 1912-2014" (<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/9278>). "Virginia, Divorce Records, 1918-2014" (<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/9280>).

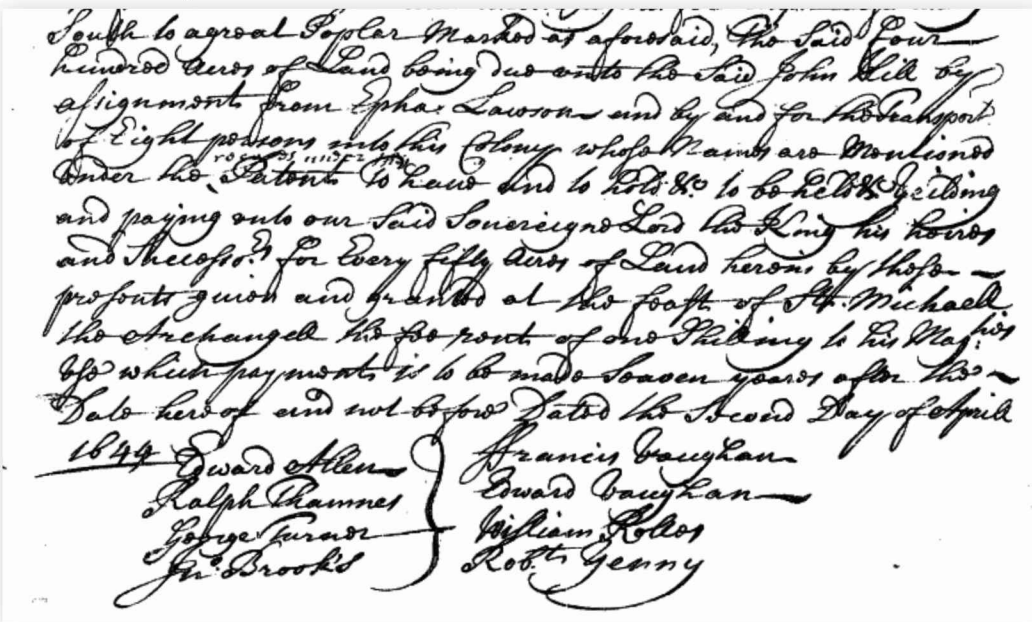
8. Fairfax County, Virginia, Deed Book D:115, Kennady to Hague; digital images, FamilySearch (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-CS4V-Y33F-M>).



The Colonial Land Office and, after the Revolution, the Virginia Land Office issued patents or titles to vacant land. Nell Nugent abstracted these records up to 1732 in *Cavaliers and Pioneers*, and the Virginia Genealogical Society has continued to abstract the patent books through 1782.<sup>9</sup> The next volume will cover records through 1785 and should be available for sale by the NGS conference.

## Headrights

The headright system was an attempt to encourage immigration to Virginia during the colonial period. Any person who settled in Virginia, or who paid the transportation cost for another individual, was entitled to receive fifty acres per person or “head.” Headrights could be bought and sold and were subject to many abuses. The system was eventually abolished in 1780.<sup>10</sup>



Virginia Land Office Patents and Grants, Northern Neck Grants and Surveys, Patents No. 2, 1643-1551, p. 5, patent of John Hill; Library of Virginia (<http://image.lva.virginia.gov/LONN/LO-1/002-1/1-100.html>).

## County records

Most records are kept at the county level. As the population grew and moved west, new counties were created and existing boundaries changed. The eight original counties eventually became 172. Nine are now part of Kentucky and fifty are in West Virginia. Virginia currently has ninety-five counties. An ancestor might have lived in one place continuously

yet resided in several counties, necessitating research in all relevant counties.

Check boundary changes in books such as Everton’s *The Handybook for Genealogists*<sup>11</sup> or Thorndale and Dollarhide’s *Map Guide to the U.S. Federal Censuses 1790-1920*.<sup>12</sup> An interactive map of Virginia counties appears at MAPofUS.org (<https://www.mapofus.org/Virginia>). A map slide show illustrates the formation of the counties and the westward settlement of Virginia. Specifying a year to view the counties in existence at that time is another option. The Newberry Library (<https://publications.newberry.org/ahcbp/pages/Virginia.html>) has an online atlas of historical Virginia county boundaries with other useful information.

Thanks to a few dedicated individuals, many of the county records before 1800 have been abstracted.

John Frederick Dorman published over seventy-five volumes of abstracts and Ruth and Sam Sparacio published three hundred. Their work simplifies research in court, deed, and will books.

Some counties have retained their original records; most have sent originals or copies to the Library of Virginia. Check the LVA catalog and microfilm finding aid for the county, and concentrate research at LVA before visiting individual courthouses. If LVA doesn’t

have the county’s records, research the area to learn where they are held.

## Independent cities

Virginia has thirty-eight independent cities with their own records. Alexandria, for example, is an independent city adjacent to the county of Arlington, while Richmond is an independent city adjacent to

9. Nell Marion Nugent, *Cavaliers and Pioneers: Abstracts of Virginia Land Patents and Grants, 1623-1782*, 8 vols. (Richmond, VA: Virginia State Library and Virginia Genealogical Society, 1971-).

10. “Headrights (VA-NOTES),” *Library of Virginia* ([https://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/guides/va4\\_headrights.htm](https://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/guides/va4_headrights.htm)).

11. *The Handybook for Genealogists: United States of America* (Logan, UT: Everton Publishers, 2006).

12. William Thorndale and William Dollarhide, *Map Guide to the U.S. Federal Censuses 1790-1920* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., Inc., 1987).



the county of Henrico. Researchers must check the formation date of the city and the territory it annexed, then check all jurisdictions for available records. This broad search is needed even if ancestors lived outside the city, since their business might have taken them into the city and created records there. Although two existing counties—Charles City County and James City County—contain the word “city” in their name, they function as counties.

### Burned counties

Many of Virginia’s counties suffered losses of records during the Civil War, and courthouse fires have also taken their toll. The Library of Virginia has a Lost Records Localities Digital Collection (<http://www.virginiamemory.com/collections/lost>). Research Notes Number 30 explains the collection and how to use it.<sup>13</sup>

### Research facilities

Before traveling to a facility, visit its website. Check the online catalog and read the Frequently Asked Questions. Find out the times and restrictions of the repository. Can staff retrieve material and have it on hand? Are there specific retrieval times? Are some collections in storage, requiring extra time to be retrieved? Is the use of cell phones or cameras allowed? If traveling by car, ask about parking. Know the rules of the research facility and be ready to follow them.

When visiting a local facility, always check the card and/or computer catalog for information about the ancestor of interest, the location, and the subject. Then inquire about any special collections or materials and local sources of data such as cemetery records, newspaper collections, or surname files. If requesting assistance, briefly explain the research focus. Librarians and archivists are happy to help researchers, but they don’t have the time to listen to details about a family or do the research themselves.

Richmond is the home of the Library of Virginia and the Virginia Museum of History and Culture (formerly the Virginia Historical Society), <https://www.virginiahistory.org>. The Virginia Museum of History and Culture focuses on private materials, not

local and government records which are held by the Library of Virginia.<sup>14</sup>

Other research facilities in Richmond:

- **Beth Ahabah Museum and Archives**, <https://www.bethahabah.org/bama>. Jewish history and culture with an emphasis on Richmond.
- **L. Douglas Wilder Library**, Virginia Union University, <https://www.vuu.edu/library>. Historical records of VUU and the history of African American Richmond.
- **Valentine Richmond History Center**, <https://thevalentine.org>. The oldest museum in Richmond, with a focus on Richmond history.
- **Virginia Baptist Historical Society**, <https://baptistheritage.org>. Baptist heritage and studies.
- **William Smith Morton Library**, Union Presbyterian Seminary, <https://library.upsem.edu>. Supports the Seminary’s curricula and research needs.

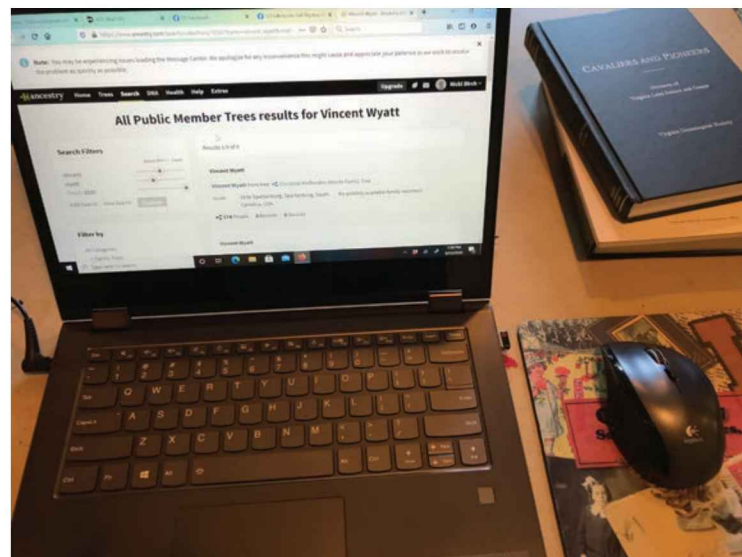
Research facilities within a one-hour drive of Richmond:

- **Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library**, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, <https://www.library.virginia.edu>. Central Virginia.
- **Central Rappahannock Heritage Center**, Fredericksburg, <https://www.crharchives.org>. City of Fredericksburg and the counties of Caroline, King George, Spotsylvania, and Stafford.
- **Central Rappahannock Regional Library’s** Virginiana Room, Fredericksburg, <https://www.librarypoint.org/virginiana>. Rappahannock County; also a miniature museum.
- **Earl Gregg Swem Library**, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, <https://libraries.wm.edu/spaces/libraries/swem-library>. Eastern and Southside Virginia.
- **Fluvanna County Historical Society**, Maggie’s House, Palmyra, <https://www.fluvannahistory.org>. Fluvanna County.

13. “Lost Records Localities: Counties and Cities with Missing Records,” *Library of Virginia* ([https://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/guides/rn30\\_lostrecords.pdf](https://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/guides/rn30_lostrecords.pdf)).

14. For profiles of the Virginia Museum of History and Culture and several other Richmond area repositories, see Robin Dwyer-Maurice and Teresa Kelley, “Research Opportunities in Richmond, Virginia,” *NGS Magazine*, July-September 2020, 14-17.

- **Goochland County Historical Society's** Cabell Library, Goochland, <http://goochlandhistory.org>. Goochland County and Virginia.
- **Huguenot Society of the Founders of Manakin in the Colony of Virginia's** Library, Midlothian, <https://www.huguenotmanakin.org/huguenotmanakin-hqs-library>. Huguenot histories. The society is comprised of descendants of the Manakin colony of French Protestants who fled religious persecution and came to Virginia before 1786.
- **John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library**, Williamsburg, <https://colonialwilliamsburg.org/locations/john-d-rockefeller-jr-library>. Colonial America, the Revolution, and the early United States.
- **Louisa County Historical Society**, Louisa, <https://louisahistory.org>. Louisa County.
- **Tidewater Genealogical Society**, Newport News, <https://www.tidewatergenealogicalsociety.org>. Virginia, North Carolina, and other states.



*Office photo by Nicki Peak Birch, cc.*

## Research trip advice

Bring a notebook of printed family group sheets and research logs or a laptop with the information in digital form. Be sure to label items so that, if lost, they can be returned.

Plan research days for efficiency. Build in breaks and meal times, and allow time for delays as well as unexpected finds. Schedule work based on personal

preference for the morning or later in the day. Bring easy research to do as well as brick walls so that success will provide extra energy. Don't focus on only one brick wall—have a plan B, C, and even D.

Most importantly, every evening review the research accomplished during the day and revise the next day's research plans accordingly.

The results of searches should be recorded in a research log. The key elements of a research log are the repository, the item searched (book, database, microfilm), the search criteria (locations, years, name spelling variants), and the results. Properly logged searches prevent redundant searches in the same record sets. All sources used should be recorded, whether useful information is discovered or not. 🌳