Online Preparation for a Research Trip to Virginia
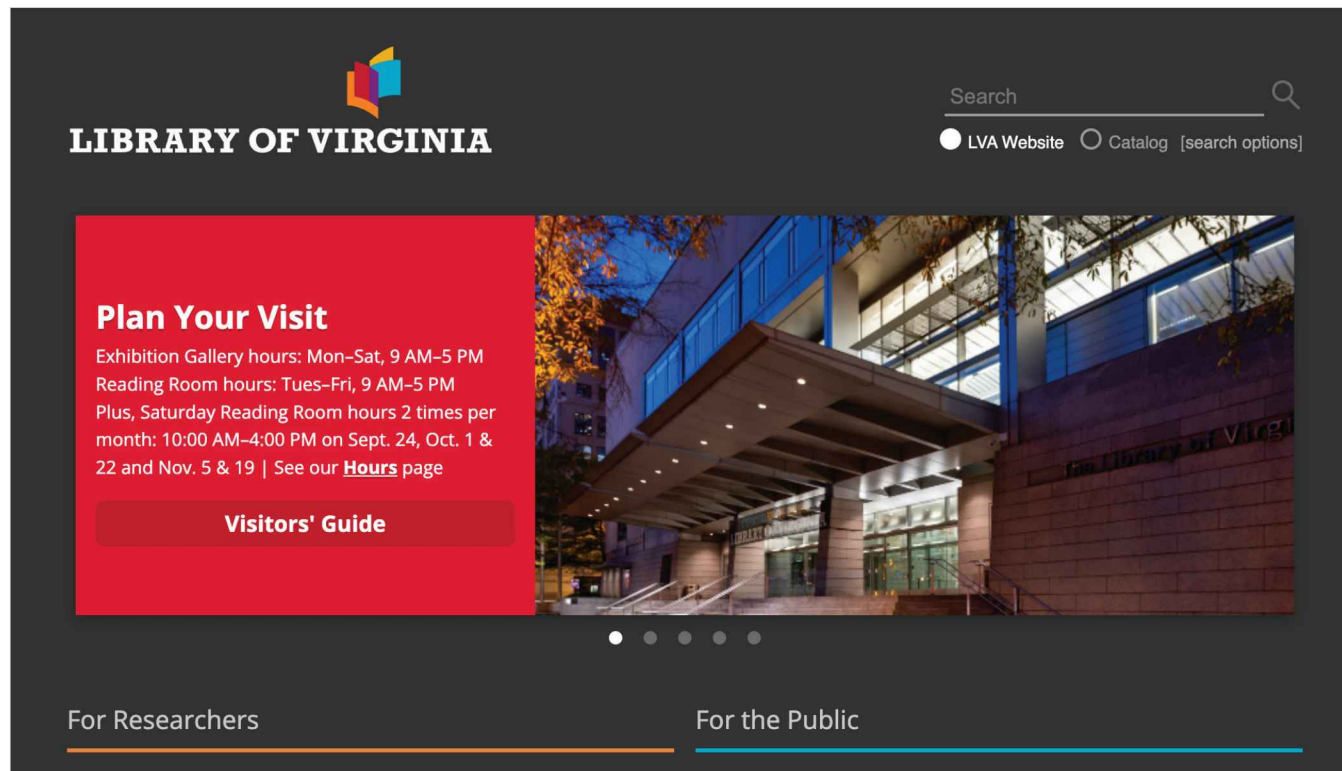
Roccie Hill, MA

Home page of the website of the Library of Virginia (LVA), https://www.lva.virginia.gov. Courtesy of LVA
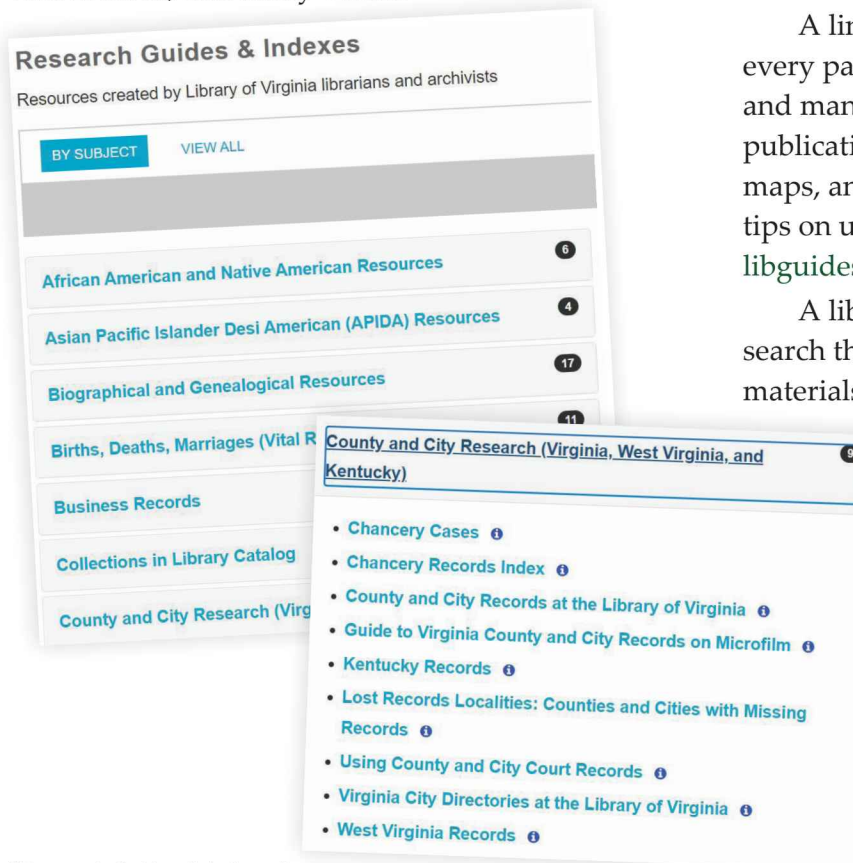
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While nothing is more exciting to genealogists than delving into stacks of original documents in a repository, conducting online preparation will ensure that professionals and hobbyists head to the right library at the right time, look in the correct stacks, and find information about ancestors much more quickly than simply showing up at the library without any preparation.

The National Genealogical Society 2023 Family History Conference in Richmond, Virginia, to be held from 31 May to 3 June 2023, is approaching, and the time to create in-person plans for a Virginia visit is now. As Nicki Peak Birch outlines in "Preparing for a Research Trip to Virginia," the most important beginning steps are to formulate research questions and develop a research plan to answer them.[1]

Some of these research questions can be addressed via online research, and others can only be researched in person at local, regional, or state repositories. Online research can help determine the documents that are only discoverable in person.

Websites cited in this article were viewed on 17 July 2022.
   1.   Nicki Peak Birch, "Preparing for a Research Trip to Virginia," *NGS Magazine 47* (January–March 2021): 10-16.

Online resources for in-person research in Virginia

The following sites provide information about repositories, catalogs, and finding aids that may be helpful in finding the locations of offline documents before travelling to Virginia.

Library of Virginia, www.lva.virginia.gov

The Library of Virginia (LVA) has the largest collection of Virginia materials in existence. Its onsite sources include published, archival, and microfilm collections, a reference department, and Special Collections (which houses maps, architectural drawings, rare books, photographs, and ephemera). A small portion of LVA's materials has been digitized and placed online; the rest await the researcher onsite. "Research Guides & Indexes" provides a categorized list of helpful resources for using LVA collections (https://lva-virginia.libguides.com), including county records, land records, newspapers, vital records, and many others.

Using County and City Court Records

Local records are the most basic resources for investigating Virginia's past. These records document the daily activities of the courts in Virginia's counties and cities. While original county and city records are often held in local courthouses, the Library of Virginia has a substantial collection of records for some localities. These records are divided into eighteen broad categories:

- **Board of Supervisors Records:** minutes of meetings of the administrative branch of local government.
- **Bonds/Commissions/Oaths:** qualifications for office and apprentice indentures.
- **Business Records/Corporations/Partnerships:** records of businesses, such as ledgers, daybooks, and accounts, usually submitted as exhibits in cases before the court.
- **Census Records:** local copies of the federal census.
- **Court Records:** minute and order books, judgments, chancery records, clerk's correspondence, execution books, memorandum books, and docket books.
- **Election Records:** poll books and lists of voters.
- **Fiduciary Records:** appraisals, inventories, estate accounts and audits, estate sales (only when recorded in separate volumes), guardian accounts and bonds, and administrator's and executor's bonds.
- **"Free Negro" and Slave Records:** records related to free and enslaved Blacks, including "Free Negro" registers, lists, and certificates.
- **Justice of the Peace Records:** executions by justices and constables.
- **Land Records:** deeds, processioners' returns, plats, and surveys.
- **Marriage Records and Vital Statistics:** marriage bonds, ministers' returns, and local copies of birth, marriage, and death registers.
- **Military and Pension Records:** militia returns, Revolutionary War and Civil War pension records, and muster rolls.
- **Organization Records:** minutes and accounts for non-business and non-government institutions, including churches, granges, and fraternal societies.
- **Road and Bridge Records:** accounts for building and maintaining roads and bridges.
- **School Records:** lists of students and textbooks used.
- **Tax and Fiscal Records:** local copies of land and personal property tax books and lists of tithables.
- **Wills:** wills and probate records recorded in will books.
- **Miscellaneous Records:** overseers of the poor records, estrays, and lists of physicians.

Robert Young Clay and J. Christian Kolbe, "Using County and City Court Records," Research Notes Number 6 (https://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/guides/rn6_countycity.pdf). Research notes are being converted to online LibGuides. Courtesy of LVA

Research Guides & Indexes

Resources created by Library of Virginia librarians and archivists

BY SUBJECT   VIEW ALL

- African American and Native American Resources   6
- Asian Pacific Islander Desi American (APIDA) Resources   4
- Biographical and Genealogical Resources   17
- Births, Deaths, Marriages (Vital R   11
- Business Records
- Collections in Library Catalog
- County and City Research (Virg

County and City Research (Virginia, West Virginia, and Kentucky)   9

- Chancery Cases ⓘ
- Chancery Records Index ⓘ
- County and City Records at the Library of Virginia ⓘ
- Guide to Virginia County and City Records on Microfilm ⓘ
- Kentucky Records ⓘ
- Lost Records Localities: Counties and Cities with Missing Records ⓘ
- Using County and City Court Records ⓘ
- Virginia City Directories at the Library of Virginia ⓘ
- West Virginia Records ⓘ

"Research Guides & Indexes" (https://lva-virginia.libguides.com) with list of guides for county and city research. Courtesy of LVA.

A link to the online catalog is on the top right of every page on the site. The catalog searches archives and manuscript collections, books and government publications, journal and newspaper titles, select maps, and select digital collections and indexes. For tips on using the catalog, see https://lva-virginia.libguides.com/catalog.

A library account or card is not needed to search the catalog, but is required for closed stacks materials to be requested and sent to the circulation area. For details about research at LVA, including its numerous digital collections, see "The Library of Virginia Welcomes Researchers."[2]

LVA's Virginia Memory (https://www.virginiamemory.com/collections) is a comprehensive online archive containing Virginia-based photographs, newspapers, historical maps, cohabitation registers for formerly enslaved people, Confederate pension documents, Jefferson's Executive Papers, Revolutionary War bounty land claims, and dozens of other databases.

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2. Virginia Dunn, "The Library of Virginia Welcomes Researchers," *NGS Magazine 47* (January–March 2021), 19-24.

Archival Resources of the Virginias (formerly Virginia Heritage), https://arvasarchive.org

This consolidated database provides a comprehensive index of finding aids to help the researcher identify where to find original records. It covers archival materials and manuscripts held by historical societies, libraries, museums, colleges, and universities across Virginia and West Virginia.

For example, to identify documents regarding Duff Green of Culpeper, Virginia, input those keywords into the search box on the home page. The search produces five finding aid results for documents and their locations, including "Guide to the William Wirt Letters, 1803-1832," for a manuscript collection held by the Library of Virginia.

The search engine retrieves results for terms in the finding aids, not in the collections they describe. Use Advanced Search for targeted searching by title, identifier, collection number, or repository name.

Some finding aids have links to digitized materials, but in most cases the materials must be viewed onsite at the institution.

To see the locations of member organizations contributing finding aids, visit https://arvasarchive.org/member-profiles. This web page has a link to profiles for each organization containing contact information, address, primary collecting areas, and a description of the repository.
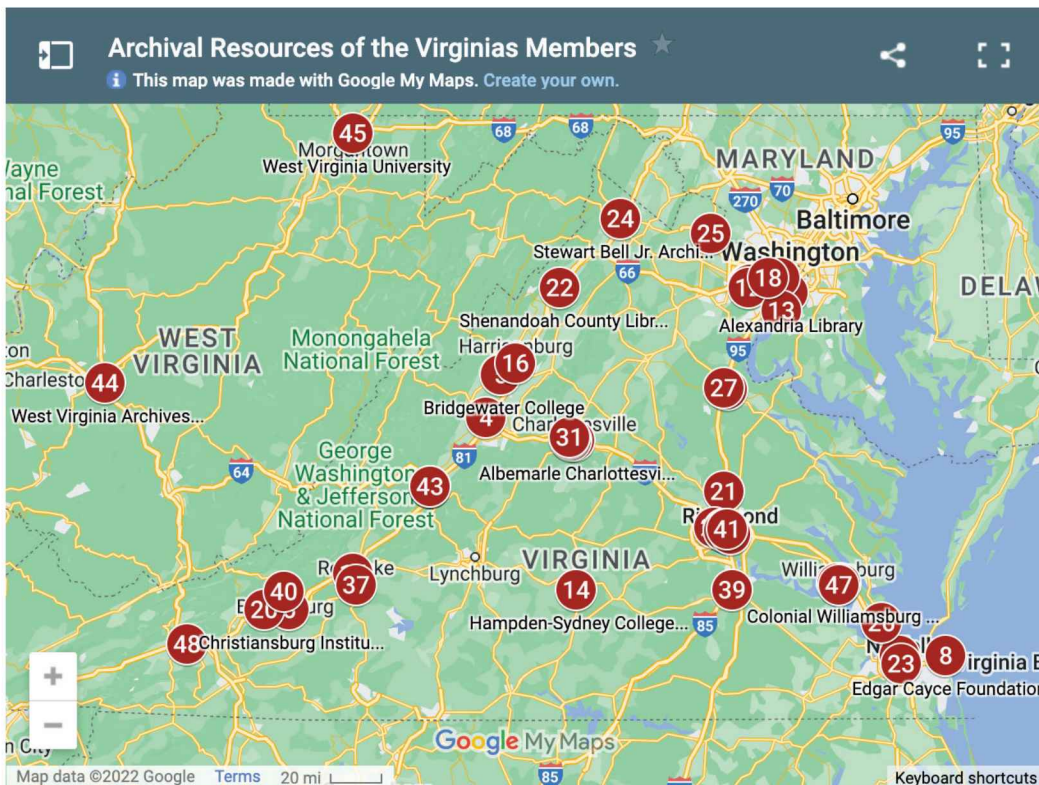
Local libraries

County and regional libraries have troves of information, and it is important to check the repositories that are geographically relevant to ancestors. For a list of all the public libraries in Virginia, searchable by county, see https://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/libraries.asp.

An example is The Thomas Balch Library of the Town of Leesburg, Loudoun County, which has seventy-four thousand history and genealogy books and periodicals, maps, visual collections, newspapers, government records, and manuscripts, including business records, diaries, and correspondence.[1] Check the catalog at https://catalog.library.loudoun.gov/?section=home.

The Balch Library's site has pathfinders about research topics and indexes for books published without them,[2] finding aids to the library's archival collections,[3] and online resources such as a cemetery database for the area, "Enslaved Community of President James Monroe," and an index of runaway slave advertisements in the *Genius of Liberty* newspaper, among others.[4]

Locations of the member organizations of Archival Resources of the Virginias (ARVAS), at https://arvasarchive.org/member-profiles. Courtesy of ARVAS

1. "Research & Reference Services," *Thomas Balch Library* (https://www.leesburgva.gov/departments/thomas-balch-library/research-reference-services).

2. "Research Guides & Book Indices," *Thomas Balch Library* (https://www.leesburgva.gov/departments/thomas-balch-library/research-reference-services/research-guides-book-indices).

3. "Collection Guides for Archives and Manuscripts," *Thomas Balch Library* (https://www.leesburgva.gov/departments/thomas-balch-library/research-reference-services/explore-our-collections/archives-and-manuscripts).

4. "Databases & Electronic Resources," *Thomas Balch Library* (https://www.leesburgva.gov/departments/thomas-balch-library/research-reference-services/databases-electronic-resources).

Another example is the Culpeper County Library (https://tlc.library.net/culpeper). Its Local History Room contains information on the Germanna colonists, books regarding colonial Virginia records, and abstract books of the early will and deed records for Culpeper and Orange counties, in addition to compiled family histories and a file collection for Culpeper names and history topics.

Historical and genealogical societies

Many societies maintain special collections relevant to their geographical areas, and most hold local photographs or other images. For a list of genealogical and historical societies in Virginia, arranged by county and independent city, see https://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/societies.asp.

The Virginia Museum of History and Culture (formerly the Virginia Historical Society) focuses on private materials. Its collection contains books, newspapers, family and personal papers, business and organizational records, genealogical materials, maps, photographs, paintings, and postcards. Check the catalog, finding aids, indexes, and research guides at https://virginiahistory.org/research/research-resources.

James Shelton, "Chesterfield Historic Courthouse at Courthouse Square, 2012," Wikimedia Commons, CC 3.0

life of the thirteen colonies and the new republic, African American studies, and historical preservation. See https://research.colonialwilliamsburg.org for links to its catalog, collection guides, periodical indexes, topical bibliographies, and digital resources. Online visitors can view numerous items such as seventeenth-century Williamsburg newspapers, research reports on local archaeology and architecture, historical reports on selected houses incorporating primary and secondary sources, and topical reports, among others.

County and city courthouses

Courthouses and government archives hold significant collections of local records, including many that have not been digitized. Some counties retain 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 or city at https://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/local/ to find out what can be researched there and what needs to be seen in the courthouse.[5]

Courtesy of Virginia Museum of History & Culture

An example of a private museum and archive is the John D. Rockefeller Jr. Library, the research center of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. It collects information about the political and economic

For links to courthouses in each Virginia county and independent city, see the FamilySearch Research Wiki article, "Virginia, United States Genealogy" (https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Virginia,_United_States_Genealogy).

5. Birch, "Preparing for a Research Trip to Virginia," 16.

Some counties offer digitized information on their sites. For example, Loudoun County's Historic Records and Deed Research Division provides online indexes of county births, deaths, deeds, chancery cases, criminal cases, marriage records, wills, and military records, at https://www.loudoun.gov/2171/Historic-Records-Indexes. Use online indexes to prepare for onsite research.

Online resources for Virginia context

Contextual research will provide the background needed to zero in on places, institutions, and associations, for seeking onsite records.

Access Genealogy: African American Cemeteries in Virginia, https://accessgenealogy.com/cemetery/virginia-african-american-cemeteries.htm

County-by-county list of links to African American cemeteries in Virginia, including photographs of headstones, community photographs, and stories.

Encyclopedia Virginia, https://encyclopediavirginia.org

Joint project of the Library of Virginia and Virginia Humanities, offering the Dictionary of Virginia Biography, podcasts, photographs, videos, and virtual tours of Montpelier, Jamestown, and other historical sites.

Freedmen's Cemetery of Alexandria, http://www.freedmenscemetery.org/resources/resources.shtml

In addition to biographies of local enslaved people, this fascinating database contains links to collections of articles, indexes, abstracts, and photographs of the African American community in Alexandria during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

VAGenWeb, http://usgenwebsites.org/vagenweb

County maps of Virginia, historical photographs of Virginia residents, Virginia parish formation dates, Virginia censuses, and a transcription of all

five volumes of Lyon Tyler's *Encyclopedia of Virginia Biography* (New York, NY: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1915).

Virginia Center for Digital History, http://www.vcdh.virginia.edu/index.php?page=Projects

List of the digital collections of the University of Virginia and its partners, featuring historical topics in (and outside of) Virginia such as the Civil War era and Reconstruction, colonial times, church records, maps, and Virginia emigrants to Liberia.

Virginia Places, http://virginiaplaces.org

Large and eclectic website with information on climate; geography and geology, with maps and information about flora and fauna; history, from prehistoric times in Virginia, through the Revolution and the Civil War, up to the modern history of cities and towns; Jamestown; Native Americans; political institutions in colonial times; and religion in Virginia.

Archival Resources of the Virginias finding aid search for Duff Green in Culpeper County. Courtesy of ARVAS

Virtual Jamestown, http://www.virtualjamestown.org/page2.html

This site has court records, labor contracts, first-hand accounts, records of the Virginia Company, and other information about Jamestown ancestors and the context of their lives.

Online collections for Virginia research

Use these sites to consult indexes and abstracts in order to locate undigitized records for onsite research, and avoid spending time on viewing records in

Virginia that can be seen online any time.

Ancestry, https://www.ancestry.com

This subscription site includes many indexes and images of Virginia records. Read database descriptions and check individual record sets to verify what types of records, time periods, and localities are included online or need to be viewed in repositories. Many collections are incomplete or not fully indexed. To find collections for Virginia, enter search terms in the card catalog (https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/catalog). On the home page, click on Search at the top and then Card Catalog.

FamilySearch, https://www.familysearch.org/en

This free site has a large collection of Virginia records, abstracts, and articles. Look for searchable or browsable collections at https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/list?cqs=virginia, and search the catalog at https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog for state, county, and city records. The Digital Library (https://www.familysearch.org/library/books) has numerous abstracts and indexes, and the Research Wiki (https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki) offers helpful articles. As with Ancestry, check the parameters of the collections to find out what needs to be viewed in repositories.

Research in the States: *Virginia*

Eric Grundset's guide to Virginia research, part of the NGS Research in the States series, provides a comprehensive look at the state's history and genealogical resources. For information on ordering print or PDF versions, see https://www.ngsgenealogy.org/ris.

Conclusion

As with any in-person research, spend time in advance to identify research questions and which geographical areas and institutions will bear the most fruit. Scour library catalogs, finding aids, guides, abstracts, and indexes, to create a precise research plan for locating documents in Virginia. Explore repository websites to understand admission procedures, costs if any, hours, and other policies. By doing this online preparation, genealogists will arrive in Virginia repositories with lists of call numbers and strategies, ready for successful research. 🌲