

Barbara's Book Club at the Virginia Genealogical Society

A Researcher's Guide to Virginia's Historical Records

Chapter 1: Geography and Transportation

Chapter 2: Colony, State, and Local Record Loss

These questions are designed for reflection on Barbara Vines Little's *A Researcher's Guide to Virginia's Historical Records*, Chapters 1-2. We hope you'll consider how Virginia's unique geography, transportation, and record losses might illuminate challenges and opportunities in your own research. As you work through the chapters and questions, consider keeping a research journal to capture insights and other questions that may emerge. We'll discuss each topic at our Book Club on Wednesday, January 21 at 7PM ET.

1. The Landscape of Your Research

How might a Virginia family you're researching and their geographic location—whether Tidewater, Piedmont, or Southside—have shaped their daily lives, their economic opportunities, and the records they left behind? What assumptions have you been making about their world that geography and topography might challenge or confirm?

2. Follow the Water

Some of Virginia's rivers once served as "highways." Consider an ancestor's location in relation to major (and minor) waterways. How might an ancestor's proximity to—or distance from—navigable water have had an influence on their migrations? Or ability to raise crops? Or their access to a courthouse?

3. The Bridges We Cross

Ferries and bridges weren't just a way to cross waterways. They also served as community gathering points and mentions can often be found in minute books, road orders and petitions. You may encounter an ancestor mentioned in connection with a ferry or bridge—as operator, petitioner, or nearby resident—but, if not, how might you use this information to reconstruct their neighborhood or learn about potential friends, associates and neighbors?

4. They Went That Way: Roads

Major migration routes into and through Virginia like the Great Wagon Road, the Kanawha-James River Turnpike, and other early trails often became modern highways. Have you traced your ancestors' movements to see if they align with these known routes? Have you used road orders in your research? What might road orders and road maintenance records reveal about neighborhoods and property boundaries? Have you used historic maps to pinpoint a family's location?

5. Chugging Into the Future

Consider the arrival of canals and then railroads in Virginia. Have you investigated whether the evolution of transportation in the state created record sets that may be useful in your research?

6. The Virginia Company and the Early Colony

For those researching 17th-century Virginia, the fragmentary nature of Virginia Company and early colonial records presents unique challenges. How do you approach research in this period differently than later eras? What repositories and finding aids (including Virginia's Colonial Records Project) have you explored, or do you want to explore, to piece together these early generations of Virginia settlers?

7. Revolutionary Records

The transition from colony to Commonwealth created new governing bodies—including Revolutionary Conventions, the Committee of Safety, and a new state government. If you're researching ancestors during this period, have you used any of the unique records these transitional governments might have created?

8. The Petition as Window

Legislative petitions to the General Assembly—including religious petitions—can reveal many things about our ancestors and their communities. Have you searched for petitions that might involve your ancestors, either as primary petitioners or as a supportive community member? What might these documents tell us that might not appear in more traditional record types?

9. When the Courthouse Burns

Many Virginia researchers face the reality of courthouse fires, Civil War destruction, and simple neglect. When you hit this wall with a particular county or city, where do you go next? What alternative sources have you assembled, or considered, to work around local record loss? Have you developed any new strategies based on what you've read in these chapters?

Closing Thoughts

- What was your ah-ha discovery in these chapters?
- How has your understanding of Virginia's documentary landscape shifted?
- What new avenues of research have opened up?
- What new resources have you discovered, or do you want to explore?
- Where might geography and transportation history lead you next in your work?