RESEARCHING SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY VIRGINIANS

In researching the lives of seventeenth century immigrants to and settlers in the colony of Virginia, one will need to look at a variety of records. Some of the most useful ones in the Rockefeller Library are described below.

I. GENERAL RESOURCES
For an introduction to the full range of genealogical resources in Virginia, and especially how they differ from other colonies, see the following publications:


II. NAMES OF INDIVIDUALS
Almost no ship passenger lists have survived from the seventeenth century, and no official census was taken of all colonists after 1625. A few early immigrants are mentioned in the official records of the Virginia Company of London, the private company that was commissioned to operate the colony between 1606 and 1624. There are, however, three surviving lists, two from the decade of the 1620s and one at the turn of the eighteenth century, which often substitute for a seventeenth-century census.

Following the 1622 Indian massacre, two lists were compiled, one entitled “Lists of the Living and Dead in Virginia, 16th February, 1623” and published in J. C. Hotten’s Original Lists of Persons of Quality…. A second list, entitled “The Muster of the Inhabitants of Virginia” and dated January-February, 1624/25 has been published in John F. Dorman’s Adventurers of Purse and Person, Virginia, 1607-1624/5, which publication features proven descendants of individuals on this list through six generations. The “Muster” gives a year of arrival and the name of a ship for most, but not all, of the persons named. A single complete quitrent list survives from 1704 and can be found in Annie L.W. Smith’s Quit Rents of Virginia. Quitrents were taxes paid to the king for land owned; therefore this list is one of landowners, not all inhabitants.
Additionally, some immigrants have been identified from documents found at the Public Record Office, Kew and at Magdalene College, Cambridge in England. See the following publications based on a variety of primary seventeenth-century sources:


These records have been digitized by the Library of Congress as part of the Thomas Jefferson Papers: http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/mtjhtml/mtjser8.html


III. LAND RECORDS

Land patents are another means of identifying who was in Virginia by what date and, for some, where they lived. These patents record the first ownership of “new,” i.e. not previously owned, land. They also record lists of persons who had emigrated sometime prior to the date of the patent being issued, and whose removal to Virginia created the entitlement to land. Land between the Potomac and Rappahannock rivers was distributed through the Fairfax family rather than a government agency and these grants are published separately. Without census records, and particularly when researching a county with significant early record loss, the land patents can be helpful in locating individuals and identifying family migration patterns. See the following publications:


IV. GOVERNMENT RECORDS

Legal records that identify individuals also include those produced by various parts of the colonial government. See the following:


Statutes at Large... The Laws of Virginia, from ...the Year 1619. Vols 1 -3. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1969. Ref. KFV 2425.2 1809b

V. COUNTY, PARISH AND CHURCH RECORDS
Once a county of residence has been established, one may look for surviving legal or church records, deeds, wills and probate records, inventories, court orders, parish registers and vestry books, for that county. County and parish boundaries changed over time as lands were settled further inland, so a family might be recorded in several different counties without ever moving. The maps in the three titles by C. F. Cocke listed below are especially helpful in understanding these changes. See the following published sources:


Of local interest to the Williamsburg focus of this library, the York County Records Project compiled a Biographical File on microfilm of names found in the colonial court records of York County. Both the Biographical File and matching microfilm of the original county records are available in Special Collections. Since the colonial court records of neighboring James City County do not survive, these are especially important for Williamsburg research.

VI. MILITARY RECORDS
Very few records of specific military rank or duty survive from the seventeenth century. Organized armed civilians, known as the militia, were the colony’s only protection against
Indian raids, internal revolt and the threat of Spanish and Dutch invasion. During the early years of the century all able-bodied men, including indentured servants and slaves, were expected to participate in militia activities. By the end of the century membership in the militia was more restricted. Participation in Bacon’s Rebellion in 1676 is slightly better documented than for other conflicts. See the following:


VII. PRIVATE RECORDS
Letters, diaries, business records and other privately created documents are all part of our Special Collections. Many may be available in published or transcript format, as well as photocopy and original. One of the most useful for genealogical research is the collection of family bible records searchable at the Library of Virginia’s web site at http://lva1.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/F/?func=file&file_name=find-b-clas05&local_base=CLAS05.

VIII. VIRGINIA COLONIAL RECORDS PROJECT
The VCRP, also located in Special Collections, is a microfilm series of early records obtained from institutions and record offices in Great Britain and Western Europe. The abstracted survey reports of these records are available in print, but are more easily searchable through the digital images at the Library of Virginia’s web site at http://www.virginiamemory.com/collections/collections_by_topic under “Historic Virginia Government”.

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Revised 10/12