RESEARCHING WILLIAMSBURG AREA VIRGINIANS

The City of Williamsburg, established as Virginia’s capitol in 1699 and incorporated in 1722, lies squarely on the boundary line between two counties, James City County and York County. Finding information on individuals who lived in this area depends largely on which county your ancestors lived in and when, because of the destruction of court records during the Civil War. Successful research will probably need to cover both counties.

Before 1722 Williamsburg city records were not kept separately from the counties, and legal issues were recorded in an individual’s county of residence. A Hustings Court was set up when Williamsburg was incorporated, but the records of that court were burned during the Civil War. James City County was one of the eight original counties created in 1634 and at that time extended both north and south of the James River. Boundary changes include Surry County formed from James City in 1652, a portion transferred to Charles City County in 1720, and a land swap with New Kent County in 1766. James City County has a history of significant record loss. All county court records were destroyed by fire in 1865.

Also one of the eight original counties, York County was first named Charles River County in 1634 and renamed York in 1642/43. New counties formed out of York were Gloucester in 1651 and New Kent in 1654. York’s court records are intact from 1634, and are especially important to local research, since all adjacent counties are “burned counties” with nearly complete court record loss.

Therefore, with only the exceptions noted below, the early records of the City of Williamsburg are either well preserved (if on the York side of the boundary) or missing (if on the James City side). Research on James City County families is hindered by the loss of court records, but this may be compensated for by using the few remaining resources (such as land patents, church records or tax lists), supplemented by looking in York County records. Research on York County families is easier; however, any surviving records from other counties should be used for a more comprehensive picture.

Suggested sources which include information pertinent to both James City and York are listed in the first section below, subdivided by type of record, and annotated to point out any differences for each county. The last two sections are additional sources which are specific to a single county, also grouped by type of record.


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RECORDS WHICH INCLUDE BOTH JAMES CITY AND YORK:

Land Records:
Patents record the ownership of “new” (previously unowned) land. Once the ownership was recorded, land transfers were recorded in the deeds. Patents cover land in both counties, while deeds only exist for York County. Sometimes patents recording first land ownership give enough details to locate early settlers in a specific geographic area.

House Histories for CW properties.  Located in the Lektriever; ask for assistance at the Reference Desk.
These unpublished reports are descriptions of land ownership and usage for properties now owned by Colonial Williamsburg and located in the “Historic Area.” Less information is known about James City County sites than those in York County.

Tax Records:
A single surviving colony-wide list of landowners obligated to pay this land tax to the king. Gives number of acres taxed and identifies county.

Church and Cemetery Records:
Middleton Parish, formed in 1658 from earlier parishes lying in both James City and York counties, combined with Marston Parish of York County in 1674 to form Bruton Parish. This register includes baptisms from 1739-1797 from Bruton Parish and deaths from 1662-1751, beginning when the area was known as Marston, later Middleton and extending into the time it was known as Bruton.


Includes extracts from the vestry book 1674-1769 made during the nineteenth century before the original book was destroyed in a fire, as well as lists of baptisms and deaths from the surviving register.

Volume 6 is Virginia records; chapter on Henrico Monthly Meeting covers geographic area that included both James City and York counties.
James City and York Counties


**Families and Individuals:**

Online Catalog

Search the family or individual name in our online library catalog. Change the drop down box from “all fields” to “subject.”

https://catalog.swem.wm.edu/cw/Search/Advanced


Comprehensive, documented to primary sources. Includes history of 78 European settlements before 1635.


Includes description of surviving court records from all seventeenth-century counties.


Includes the “List of the Living and the Dead” taken in 1623/4.


Traces the first six generations of descendants of 132 individuals who appeared in the 1625 “Muster of Inhabitants,” taken of the survivors of the 1622 Indian massacre. Many settlers have date of arrival and ship’s name recorded here.


Reimbursement claims against the state of Virginia for non-military patriotic service performed during the Revolutionary War. Divided by county.


Gives distance and direction from the courthouse for each landowner.
Research Query File
Letters and memos which mention individual names and the accompanying index. Contact a reference librarian for assistance (libref@cwf.org).

Census Records and Census Substitutes:
Tax lists are frequently recognized as a useful substitute for missing federal census records. Generally, when this substitution has been published, the attempt has been made to find the tax list closest to the date of the missing census. See also the section “Tax Records.”

City of Williamsburg residents from a 1782 tax list.

Includes 1782 personal property tax list for James City County, and 1784 list for York County.

Based on tax lists for James City for 1787, City of Williamsburg for 1786 and 1788, and York for 1786 and 1788.

James City County, York County and City of Williamsburg all listed separately.

Other Government Records:
Hening, William Waller. *Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia, From ... 1619.* Charlottesville: University Pr. of Va., 1969. VA Ref KFV 2425.2 1809b
Indexed in Earl Gregg Swem’s *Virginia Historical Index.* VA Ref F 221.S93
Some early laws mention individuals or families. For example, the breaking of entailed estates lists names and relationships to the land owner.

Minutes of the colonial legislature.
James City and York Counties

Most General Court records burned in 1865. Those remaining cover the years 1622-1632 and 1670-1683.

Virginia Colonial Records Project (VCRP):
Abstracts of European records which pertain to colonial Virginia. Abstracts are available in “survey reports” in the Special Collections section of the library. Both the survey reports and their index are available on the internet site for the Library of Virginia at http://lva1.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/F/?func=file&file_name=find-b-clas27&local_base=CLAS27. Many of the original VCRP documents are available on microfilm at the Rockefeller Library.

Maps:
Reproduction maps of the area are located in the Special Collections reading room. Please ask for reference assistance in locating them. Written permission may be required from the institutions which own the originals in order to make copies from this collection. Early twentieth century Sanborn Fire Insurance maps of the City of Williamsburg from the originals at the Library of Congress are available on microfilm M-2030.

Newspapers:
The Virginia Gazette, first published in Williamsburg in 1736, is available in photostat for the years 1736-1780 in the Reference section of the library, as is the index for those years. Copies of newspaper articles from these years must be made from the microfilm version located in Special Collections. The index and images are also available from a link at the library’s website: http://research.history.org/DigitalLibrary/VirginiaGazette/VGPPIndex.cfm. 20th century bound original Gazettes from 1930-1977 are held in the Reference section of the library. These may not be photocopied due to their fragility.

School Records:
Provisional List of Alumni, Grammar School Students, Members of the Faculty, and Members of the Board of Visitors of the College of William and Mary in Virginia, from 1693 to 1888. Richmond: Division of Purchase and Printing, 1941. Ref LD 6051.W51 P76 https://digitalarchive.wm.edu/handle/10288/13856

JAMES CITY COUNTY:

Land Records:
This is a reprint of land patents taken from Nugent’s volumes, separated by county. Volume 3 covers James City County.
James City County

Miscellaneous land records and abstracts of land patents taken from manuscripts at the Library of Congress and from land patent books at the Library of Virginia archives.

**Court Records:**
Surviving wills from the Chancery Court in Williamsburg.

Wills found in neighboring county court records or located in public manuscript collections. Many previously published.

**Tax Records:**
Tithable lists for 1768 and 1769.

Taken from original manuscripts at the Library of Virginia.

James City County Land Tax Records, 1783-1861 (microfilm)
Taken from the originals at the James City County Clerk’s Office.  **M-1-56, 57**

James City County Personal Property Tax Lists, 1782-1861 (microfilm)
Taken from the originals at the James City County Clerk’s Office.  **M-1-53, 54, 55**

**Church and Cemetery Records:**
Covers the western part of James City County and part of eastern New Kent County.

This parish is now in New Kent County, but originally included a part of western James City County.

**Families and Individuals:**

**Marriage Records:**

**Census Records and Census Substitutes:**


**Archaeological Site Reports and Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Research Reports:**


**History:**
*Heritage and Historic Sites: An Inventory and Description of Historic Sites in James City County.* James City Co, Va: Comprehensive Planning Team, 1975. Ref F 232.J15 H47 1975 Gives a brief description and location of a number of historic sites, including those on the National Register of Historic Places and on the Virginia Landmarks Register, as well as those less well known.


Bradshaw, Nancy S. *Tales from James City County, Virginia Oral Histories*. James City County: James City County Historical Commission, 1993. F 232.J15 T35 1993
James City County

Comprehensive history from earliest settlement to the present.

Not indexed.

YORK COUNTY:

**Land Records:**

**Court Records:**
“York County Records Project.”
Microfilm of all existing deeds, court orders and wills is available in the Special Collections section of the library. There is also a microfilmed card index to these records, alphabetical by individual name. M-1797, 1-152


Several volumes abstract the years 1687-1697.

York County


**Church and Cemetery Records:**

Bell, Landon C. *Charles Parish, York County, Virginia, History and Registers.* Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1932. **F 232 Y6 B3.**

This register covers births 1648-1789 and deaths 1665-1787.

**Families and Individuals:**


**Marriage Records:**


**Census Records and Census Substitutes:**


Includes York County in alphabetical listing by head of household.

**Archaeological Site Reports and Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Research Reports:**


Discusses the Henry Lee family of York County.


Discusses the John Page archaeological site from prehistoric activity through two hundred years of colonial occupation.

Compiled by S. Shames
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