Virginia Research: Four Centuries of History and Genealogy

19th Century – Civil War and Reconstruction

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History

The Civil War shaped nearly every aspect of life in Virginia in the 19th century. Rising tension during the antebellum period initiated an increase in laws restricting the lives of enslaved and free people of color in the state. Slave laws relegated enslaved people to nothing more than property and the prohibition of importing slaves from Africa led to an increase in the domestic slave trade. Understanding the legal status of enslaved and free ancestors is key to identifying record sets and to understanding the times in which those ancestors lived.

Laws such as those denying free people of color the right to remain in the state without permission created hundreds of petitions that often include information about their families, employers, or special skill sets that would allow them to remain in Virginia. Likewise, statewide mandates to record births even for those enslaved made an important pre-emancipation record of births that link individuals to their mothers and enslavers, which can aid in further research.

Even if ancestors were not enslaved and did not own slaves themselves, their lives would have been shaped by slavery since it was so closely tied to the economy of the state. The rising tensions leading to the Civil War also shaped politics in the state and would eventually lead even those that did not have a direct stake in slavery to fight for the confederacy.

Reconstruction and emancipation created new opportunities and restrictions for those previously enslaved and the people that previously enslaved them. Former Confederates had to take oaths of allegiance to the Union to register to vote and their lands or property may have also been seized. The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands (commonly referred to as the Freedmen's Bureau) was created to help newly emancipated people find services such as healthcare, work, and education, while also addressing petitions from former Confederates regarding land and property.

Virginia struggled to determine what it's economy and identity looked like after the war and the legislature created new laws to address questions about citizenship and access to goods and services as it moved toward the turn of the century.

Slavery in Virginia

Slavery laws in Virginia were some of the most detailed and restrictive in the country. These laws create records sets including manumissions/freedom papers, work agreements, sales, vital records, registrations, and court records. A timeline is a helpful tool while researching.

1619	Jamestown - about 20 captive Africans sold into slavery in VA
1654	VA court grants POC the right to hold slaves
1662	VA enacts hereditary slavery - child born inherits mother's status
1664	VA law mandates lifelong servitude for all black slaves
1667	VA declares that Christian baptism will not alter a person's states as a slave
1670	VA prohibits free people of color (POC) from keeping Christian (white) servants
1680	VA forbids POC and slaves from bearing arms - congregate in large numbers -mandates harsh punishments for assaulting whites or attempting escape
1682	VA declares all imported black servants are slaves for life
1691	VA prohibits the manumission of slaves within its border - Manumitted slaves are forced to leave the colony - VA passes first anti-miscegenation law.
1705	VA Slave Code - codifies slave status, declaring all non-Christian servants entering the colony to be slaves. Defines all slaves as real estate - acquits owners who kill the enslaved during punishment - forbids slaves to bear arms or move abroad without written permission
1723	VA outlaws manumission
1774	Continental Congress approves resolution prohibiting slave importations and further American participation in the slave trade
1778	VA prohibits importation of slaves from Africa
1782	VA law permits private manumissions
1783	VA emancipates those who served in the colonial forces against Britain, provided that the slave's master gives permission
1785	Any person with black blood to be mulatto - use of the term "Negro" includes mixed-race POC
1790	Congress denies naturalization to anyone that is not a free white
1793	First Fugitive Slave Law allows enslavers to cross state lines in pursuit of fugitives
1794	Congress prohibits Slave trade between U.S. and foreign countries
1799	VA requires white mothers of mixed-race children to leave the state
1800	Congress prohibits U.S. citizens from exporting slaves
1805	VA allows the enslaved to accompany white enslavers to religious services presided over by white preachers
1806	VA requires manumitted individuals to leave the state within a year of their manumission
1816	American Colonization Society is Founded with the goal of creating a free black settlement in Africa
1819	Virginia bans blacks and mulattos, whether free or slave, from meeting for the purposes of education and forbids teaching blacks to read and write. Virginia and North Carolina remove restraints on interstate slave trade.

	Canada denies the American government the right to pursue runaway slaves within its borders.
1820	Slavery Act - US law makes slave trading a capital offense. Missouri Compromise
1831	Nat Turner Rebellion in Southampton, Virginia Virginia passes a law enforcing prohibitions against slaves congregating for religious service at night, regardless of whether black or white preachers hold those services.
1849	Virginia passes a law permitting the emancipation of any slave by will or deed. Liberia is recognized as a sovereign state by Britain. Joseph Jenkins Roberts, the son of free Virginian blacks, becomes the first president.
1850	Virginia demands that emancipated slaves leave the state within a year and forbids the legislature from freeing any slave. Second Fugitive Slave Law & Compromise of 1850
1853	VA requires the registration of births and deaths including enslaved people.
1857	Dred Scott v. Sanford Decision denies citizenship to all slaves, ex-slaves, and descendants of slaves. Richmond, VA passes slave code that restricted POC from certain parts of the city, specified street etiquette that forbad slaves from standing on the sidewalk, carrying canes, smoking, using provocative language
1862	VA authorizes the use of slaves to perform military labor. Congress abolishes slavery in Washington DC Homestead Act gives public land in the public domain to qualified private citizens, including black heads of house over 21 years old and single black women.
1863	Emancipation Proclamation
1864	Repeal of Fugitive Slave Law

Records

Records dating to the antebellum period in Virginia can be found in a variety of places, both digitally and in repositories. Many repositories, such as the Library of Virginia, have compiled finding aids or study guides into subject themes that make it easy to identify what kinds of records are available. This is not an exhaustive list of all resources in the state dating to this period but can be used to help get started searching for records.

Virginia Slave Birth Index 1853-1865

- In physical book form at NEHGS and other repositories.
  https://library.nehgs.org/record=b1097139

- Digitally available at FamilySearch.org and is searchable. https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/3326815
- Records contain name of enslaved person, name of their mother, date and place of birth, and the name of the informant (most frequently the enslaver or overseer)

Virginia Untold: The African American Narrative by the Library of Virginia

- Searchable database of records and study guides available at virginiamemory.com.
- Types of records included: bills of sales, cohabitation registers, deeds of emancipation, free negro registrations, free negro tax records, freedmen's contracts, freedom suits, petitions to remain in the state, and many others.
- Library of Virginia study guide on African American Research at the Library of Virginia to 1870: lva-virginia.libguides.com/african-american

Virginia Chronicle by the Library of Virginia

- Searchable database of Virginia Newspapers: virginiachronicle.com

Free African Americans

- Collections of research on families of free people of color living in Virginia and other southern states. Much of the Virginia content is 18th and early 19th century, but may help in identifying free ancestors and record sets from the footnotes. www.freeafricanamericans.com

19th Century Census Records

Year	Description	Notes
1800-1840	Census lists only head of households and age brackets for members of household	Second Page has brackets for Slaves and Free People of Color
1850-1860	General Census for all free people, separate Slave Schedules that list enslaved population	If ancestors are recorded by name on the general Federal Census these years – they were free.
1870+	Post emancipation all listed on the census are free	1870 first Federal Census to list formerly enslaved people by name.

The 1850-1860 Slave Schedules can be confusing and are only useful in identifying an enslaved person if you know who enslaved them as the records only include the name of the enslaver. They only include a description by age, sex, and color of enslaved people, and considering ages of enslaved people who did not always know their birthyears can vary across records, it is not a tool to be used for concrete identification. However, it can be a useful tool in combination with other sources.

Using the 1850-1860 Slave Schedules	
Columns in the record:	Notes:
• Location (Town, County, State) • Name of Slave Owner • Sometimes overseers are recorded • Description of the enslaved – Age, Sex, Color • Fugitive status • Manumission status • Number of slave houses	• Slave schedules are usually NOT enough to make an identification alone. • Use it to speculate; may help guide you to other records. • Sometimes family units are recorded together - you can tell by the ages of each group • Remember ages can fluctuate across records

The Civil War

The Civil War was the defining element of this century in Virginia as nearly every part of life before, during, and after the war was shaped by the issues leading to the war and its aftermath. Searching for Confederate ancestors that served during the war is much the same as searching for Union soldier records, as they are housed within the same repositories and databases, with some additional sources to check for southern ancestors mainly in petitions for the replacement or return land or property that was taken during the war.

Resource Guides relating to the Civil War:

- Virginia in the Civil War at FamilySearch.org
  https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Virginia_in_the_Civil_War
- Library of Virginia – Virginia in the American Civil War
  https://lva-virginia.libguides.com/civil-war
- Library of Virginia – Using Virginia Civil War Records
  https://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/guides/rn14_usingcivwar.pdf

Resources on Military Service:

- National Park Service Soldiers and Sailors Database includes information on the men that served during the Civil War for the Union and Confederacy. This is searchable by name or browsable by

state and unit. It also provides brief descriptions of the regiments and the service they participated in during the war. https://www.nps.gov/civilwar/soldiers-and-sailors-database.htm

- Fold3.com has the Civil War Service Index (CMSR) – Confederate – Virginia database that includes service cards for men that served from the state. The index will also direct you to the full service record of the soldier that can be viewed on Fold3 or ordered from NARA.
- National Archives is where the records from both previous digital search options are held. You can also search and request records directly from NARA. https://www.archives.gov/research/military/civil-war

Publications

Studies of the civil war and published works detailing battles can provide context to an ancestor's service in the Civil War and provide a better sense of the social and political ramifications of the war.

- U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: a Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*. Provides reports and details about the campaigns of both Union and Confederate armies. Now on Hathi Trust and accessible for free. For easy navigation of the multiple volumes use Cornell University Library's "Making of America" page: http://collections.library.cornell.edu/moa_new/waro.html
- U.S. War Department, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion.* Includes the details of the naval campaigns of both Union and Confederate armies. Now on Hathi Trust and accessible for free. For easy navigation of the multiple volumes use Cornell University Library's "Making of America" page: http://collections.library.cornell.edu/moa_new/ofre.html
- Frederick H. Dyer, *A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion*, (Des Moines, IA: Dyer Publishing Co.), 1908. Available by PDF from Library of Congress here: https://www.loc.gov/item/09005239
- Stewart Sifakis, *Compendium of the Confederate Armies,* 11 vols, (New York: Facts on File), 1992-97.
- Bell I. Wiley, *The Life of Johnny Reb: The Common Soldier of the Confederacy,* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press), 1943.
- James Randall and David Donald, *Civil War and Reconstruction,* (Boston: Heath), 1961.
- Henry P. Beers, *The Confederacy: A Guide to the Archives of the Confederate States of America,* (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration), 1986.
- Lee A. Wallace, Jr., *A Guide to Virginia Military Organizations, 1861–1865*. Revised 2d ed. (Lynchburg, Va.: H. E. Howard, Inc.), 1986.
- The Roster of Confederate Soldiers, 1861–1865 (16 vols.), an alphabetical list of every Confederate soldier with a CMSR at the National Archives.
- James I. Robertson, Jr., *Civil War Echoes: Voices From Virginia, 1860-1891, A Virginia Sesquicentennial Signature Publication,* (Richmond, Virginia: Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War Commission), 2016.

West Virginia

Though the Capital of the Confederacy was in Richmond not all Virginians supported succession, resulting in the creation of West Virginia by Unionists in 1863. In most cases, repositories in West Virginia hold records for the area that became that state. The Library of Virginia also has some West Virginia Records which they compiled into a study guide. https://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/wv/

The West Virginia Department of Arts, Culture, and History contains lists of databases pertaining specifically to the counties that became West Virginia. They are located in one helpful guide: https://wvculture.org/research/archives-and-history-research-databases/

Reconstruction

The years following the Civil War were perhaps some of the most challenging and tumultuous in the nation's history. The federal programs and state legislation during this period shaped the political, economic, and social trajectory for Virginia. Programs such as The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands or simply "Freedmen's Bureau" was created to help aid Southerners displaced by war while also working to integrate four million newly emancipated African Americans into the political and social life in America.

On March 3, 1865, Congress passed "An Act to establish a Bureau for the Relief of Freedmen and Refugees." The intent of the bill was to provide shelter, food, medical services, and land to those displaced by the war, including African Americans. The Freedmen's Bureau would also go on to facilitate work agreements between freedpeople and employers, provide education through the establishment of school, build monetary security through banks for freedpeople, and manage the distribution of confiscated and abandoned lands. The goal of the Bureau was to provide relief and assist formerly enslaved people become self-sufficient. All the services provided by this act created record sets that can contain valuable genealogical information.

The United States Senate website has a good history of the Freedmen's Bureau and the Congressional fight to implement it and keep it going: https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/generic/FreedmensBureau.htm

Searching Freedmen's Bureau Records

The original records are housed at the National Archives, and they have a nice guide explaining the different field office records as well as those created by Headquarters which you can access on their website: https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/freedmens-bureau#fams

American Ancestors.
by NEW ENGLAND HISTORIC GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY

Many of the records that came out of the Freedmen's Bureau have been digitized by FamilySearch.org, and a project to help index the records has made many of the documents searchable through its database – though you do still need to browse through the digitized films at times. The Virginia Freedmen's Bureau Field Office Records guide on FamilySearch provides a great history and explanation of the records and how to access them:

https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Virginia,_Freedmen%27s_Bureau_Field_Office_Records_-_FamilySearch_Historical_Records

For a detailed list of all the collections created by the Freedmen's Bureau and how to access them, see the FamilySearch wiki page on the Bureau records here:

https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/African_American_Freedmen%27s_Bureau_Records

FamilySearch has partnered with the National Museum of African American History and Culture to transcribe and index the records. As a result, you can also search for records on the NMAAHC website, though it is a bit more clunky to navigate: https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/initiatives/freedmens-bureau-records. You can also see the percentage of each field office records have been transcribed on the Smithsonian website. This may help you determine if you are not getting results on a search because the records don't exist, or simply because they have not yet been indexed and you'll need to browse them instead. You can view the project results to date here:

https://transcription.si.edu/browse?filter=owner%3A16

The work of the Bureau was varied. Its functions included:

- Provided rations and clothing
- Developed schools and providing educational opportunities for children and adults
- Supervised work contracts between those newly emancipated and planters
- Legalized marriages that took place during slavery
- Created banks to provide freedpeople the opportunity to build their own wealth
- Provided transportation to reunite families displaced by slavery or to those trying to relocate to other parts of the country.
- Assisted Black soldiers in receiving the pension payments or back pay
- Operated hospitals to provide necessary medical care

Virginia Specific Freedmen's Bureau Records				
Record Type	NARA	FamilySearch Catalog	# of Films	Additional Reading
Records of Assistant Commissioner, 1865-1869	M1048	FHL 1601562	67 rolls	Descriptive Pamphlet:M1048

Records of Sup. of Education, 1865-1870	M1053	FHL 1549578	20 rolls	Descriptive Pamphlet: M1053
Records of Field Office, 1865-1872	M1913	FHL 2413534	203 rolls	Descriptive Pamphlet M1913

Indigenous Nations in 19th Century Virginia

Virginia has always been inhabited by its original indigenous populations. By the 19th century expansion of White Euro-American settlers had displaced many Native groups from their homelands. Only the Mattaponi and Pamunkey have ever had reservations in Virginia.

For more information on how Indigenous people navigated life in Virginia in the late 19th century to early 20th century, see Laura J. Feller, *Being Indigenous in Jim Crow Virginia: Powhatan People and the Color Line,* (University of Oklahoma Press), 2022.

The Library of Virginia has a study guide listing all its collections that pertain to the indigenous groups that lived and live in the state. It can be a helpful starting point in searching for more historic context relating to Indigenous people during every century discussed in this course: https://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/guides/ResourcesOnVirginiaIndians.pdf

State Recognized Indigenous Groups		
Nation	**Year Recognized**	**Location**
Mattaponi	17th century	Banks of the Mattaponi River, King William Co.
Pamunkey*	17th Century	Banks of the Pamunkey River, King William Co.
Chickahominy*	1983	Charles City Co.
Eastern Chickahominy*	1983	New Kent Co.
Rappahannock*	1983	Indian Neck, King & Queen Co.
Upper Mattaponi*	1983	King William Co.
Nansemond*	1985	Cities of Suffolk and Chesapeake
Monacan Indian Nation*	1989	Bear Mountain, Amherst Co.
Cheroenhaka (Nottoway)	2010	Courtland, Southampton Co.
Nottoway of Virginia	2010	Capron, Southampton Co.
Patawomeck	2010	Stafford Co.

*Federally recognized