

Verifying Your Jamestowne Lineage

Breaking Down Brick Walls in Jamestowne Research

Bonnie Hofmeyer, Executive Director of the Jamestowne Society; bhofmeyer@jamestowne.org

Common Mistakes to Avoid

Review Online Tree Citations

When searching for specific generational information on websites like Ancestry.com, you will often come across member-created trees showing connections. There may even be multiple online trees showing the same connections, but these trees often don't include citations or primary source documents. It is important to check sources (if listed), as the information does not always apply to the individuals in the chart. It does not matter how many people have the same connection in their trees—without an applicable primary source it is speculated. An unverified genealogy tree or chart is not proof.

Avoid the “Surround and Drown” Method

Listing every source you can find to prove your case won't help. Including five undocumented secondary sources is not proof. A beginning researcher will conclude, if all these sources have it, it must be true. Flooding your application with multiple undocumented sources will not make it acceptable. We call this the surround and down method—don't do this. If you believe the undocumented information to be true, then find primary source documentation to support your theory.

Recommended Sources

Tax Records

If you are unable to find a will, follow the land a person owned. Land tax records show transfer of property—this is useful for substituting missing deeds and for determining estate division. Virginia began keeping tax lists in 1782 (except for years 1809 [tax law wasn't passed], & 1864). Two kinds of lists were recorded—land tax records (acreage) and personal property tax records. The type of personal property taxed depended on the time period. In the beginning it included enslaved people, horses, cattle, and riding vehicles. Later lists also included furniture, silver, musical instruments, etc.

Personal property taxes can show death dates (the year), wife's name, and males when they reached taxable age (16-21). Sometimes you can follow personal property (such as enslaved people) through the sale or inheritance. If the decedent owned property outside of the area of residence the will may be recorded where the other land was located.

Unrecorded Wills & Deeds

Check the local courthouse for unrecorded wills and deeds—these were kept in a separate file. When a grantor failed to come to court and the witnesses to the deed failed to come in to prove the deed, it was not recorded. However, courthouses would hold on to them—they were not discarded. If you are looking for a land transfer and you can't find it but you know someone got the land, this is probably what happened, especially if you find the change in the tax records. It will depend on the county, but it doesn't hurt to check. Similarly, wills not proven by the witnesses were not recorded, but usually kept in a separate file.

Chancery Records

Chancery records are wonderful documents because they often contain a lot of genealogical information. When an inheritance needs to be divided chancery suits list the heirs and division. These records can include copies of wills or deeds from counties which lost their records due to war or fire. These records include collateral inheritance and list extended family members and sometimes include charts. They sometimes include charts. You can find chancery records here: <https://www.virginiamemory.com/collections/chancery/>.

Vital Records

Look for vital records of extended family members. Virginia kept vital statistics such as birth and death records from 1853-1896 and then starting again in 1912. If you can't find records on the person you are researching, see if you can find records on their siblings that prove the names of parents. Virginia was already keeping marriage records. Names of parents were not always given. Record keeping was during the Civil War in some counties.

Land Office Military Certificates

Land Office Military Certificates can be useful. This is a certificate for land provided to the serviceman. They were entitled to this for their service during the Revolutionary war. Land for Virginia soldiers was located in Kentucky and Ohio. These records should be checked because sometimes they include wills and court testimony providing the names and relations of heirs if the landowner is deceased.

Bounty Warrants

Bounty Warrants are papers that document revolutionary war service and are useful as they sometimes include lists of heirs, especially in cases when the soldier died young, or if heirs applied at a later date. Heirs would have to prove their relationship. Bounty Warrants are available online at the library of Virginia—you can find a guide to the records here: <https://lva-virginia.libguides.com/c.php?g=1197762&p=8760744>.

Understanding County Formation

It is helpful to understand which counties were originally part of another county. See slide 15 in the slide PDFs shared with you for this class—it includes a chart with the Formation of Virginia Counties from 1634.



When You Can't Find a Will

- Check personal property tax records
- Look for others with the same surname
- Review wills and records for extended family

Variant Spellings

Try different spellings of the surname—spelling was fluid until the 1750s. One ancestor's name was spelled as Hayward, Heyward, & Howard.

Church/Parish Records

Some church and parish records survive. Baptism records list the father and sometimes the mother. Marriage records might list the parents and would give the marriage date. Death records would have the date and location of burial. These would be acceptable records.

Obituaries

Obituaries are useful because they can name the deceased parents, children, and other relations. They can provide the birth and death dates in some cases, as well as a burial location. This is acceptable if you do not have a death record. Make sure you provide the name of the newspaper or publication and date of the obituary.

Writing a Proof Argument

If you are writing a proof argument you must cite all the reasons for the theory. It should include primary sources to support it. This can include extended family members wills, personal property tax records, and sale of property. A written family history is acceptable if it's contemporary to the time.

If there are several individuals of the same name, it is wise to examine them all and then show the relevance of the theoretical line the applicant is using. Naming patterns are not particularly relevant in many cases, especially when the first names are very common like John or Mary. Unusual names or surnames are more helpful. Note that it is not recommended to write a proof argument for more than one generational connection.

What Not to Include in Your Proof Argument

- Your proof argument should not include only suggestions as to why something that is an anomaly has occurred. This is the compiler's theory and indicates that there is a weakness in the argument.
- The argument must include relevant primary source documents. You may have several documents that establish someone was in Jamestown and appeared in court records, but if you do not have a

primary document establishing a relationship, those other documents are not really helpful.

- Do not state “this is the only time this forename appears,” especially in a burned or lost record county. If little documentation exists, it does not mean much to use this as your argument.
- Relations and neighbors are important and there was often a connection between them and your ancestor that can be useful. However, if this is the only support for the argument, that is not sufficient proof unless you are using a primary source to back it up.
- It was not common for individuals to be disinherited and when this was the case, it was often stated in the will. This is why you see family members being given a shilling, or a spoon, bed linen, or other small item. The will could also state a particular family member had already received their portion. This was done so individuals could not come back and challenge the will.

Family Associations

Check to see if there are family association groups. Some Jamestowne ancestors like Richard Pace, Thomas Owsley, John Gaither, and John Graves have family associations. Since organizations like these are focused on one ancestor and their lines, they can have useful information to assist you. They may have records or know of sources they can direct you to.

Some family groups of ancestors Francis Epes and William Claiborne hired a reputable genealogist to publish printed genealogies. Both hired John Dorman, author of *Adventurers of Purse and Person*, and these are well done as they are footnoted with primary sources.