Virginia History

Virginia was the first colony established in North America. In 1584, Sir Walter Raleigh established a colony in the New World being given permission by Queen Elizabeth. He named the area for the Virgin Queen, but his undersupplied colonies disappeared with little trace.

In 1606, King James I chartered the Virginia Company of London (often called the London Company), and in 1607 the first settlers arrived landing at Point Comfort. With great hope but little practical experience they struggled with hardships. Most of those original settlers did not survive and very few Americans living today can trace their ancestry to an original Jamestown settler.

The 1600s saw many waves of adventurers from England arrive on Virginia's shores seeking riches and a new life. In 1624, King James made Virginia a royal colony, henceforth under the direction—not always peaceable—of crown-appointed governors.

The eighteenth century saw explosive expansion. The Shenandoah Valley and the lands west of the Appalachian Mountains were opened, and settlers poured down the Great Wagon Road from Pennsylvania. In the second half of the century, the Cumberland Gap was discovered and settlers began filling what would become Kentucky and West Virginia. Both were initially part of Virginia; Kentucky became a separate state in 1792, and West Virginia in 1863.

 Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Kentucky (originally part of Virginia), establish themselves in their constitutions as commonwealths and not. A commonwealth specifically identifies itself as being governed by the people as opposed to a monarch which in the 1700s was a serious issue for citizens. The U.S. government treats them as states.

It is perhaps appropriate that the first president of the United States was a native son of the first permanent English colony in North America. Four other presidents came from Virginia: Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe and John Tyler.

Many of Virginia's records have been lost to fire, war and time. Jamestown, the original capital, was destroyed three times, and some counties lost records during the Revolutionary War. However, the greatest destruction of Virginia's records occurred during the Civil War. Many courthouses were destroyed, but the most significant loss of records resulted from the burning of Richmond in 1865.

VIRGINIA CENSUSES

The first Virginia census is dated 16 February 1624 and is a list of the names of persons living in Virginia and the names of those who died since April 1623. The colony conducted a second census in January and February 1625. Another census was conducted in 1634, but is apparently lost.

Although census enumerations were taken in Virginia in 1790 and 1800, these records were destroyed except for the 1800 enumerations of Accomack and Louisa counties. Tax lists from 1787 offer a substitute for the 1790 census.

The remaining censuses are mostly complete and are available for each census year except for 1890 much of which has been destroyed. For those conducting research in West Virginia, it is important to remember, West Virginia was part of Virginia until 1863 and its citizens are found in the Virginia census records from 1810 until 1860.

Most states in U.S. are made up of counties, but Virginia's constitution allows for counties and independent cities which are not part of a specific county. There are 38 independent cities in the state. A few other states have independent cities, but most are found in Virginia. In U.S. census enumerations, independent cities are treated as counties. Independent cities have their own courts and court records and you should search for your ancestors there as well as in county records.

Ancestry.com has several "reconstructed" collections that help fill the gap of missing census records:

- U.S. Census Reconstructed Records, 1660-1820
- Heads of families at the first census of the United States taken in the year 1790. : records of the state enumerations, 1782 to 1785

Population	
1790	691, 737
1800	807,557
1810	877,683
1820	938,261
1830	1,044,054
1840	1,025,227
1850	1,119,348
1860	1,219,630
1870	1,225,163
1880	1,512,565
1890	1,655,980
1900	1,854,184
1910	2,061,612
1920	2,309,187
1930	2,421,851
1940	2,677,773
1950	3,318,689
1960	3,966,949

SIGNIFICANT DATES (THROUGH 1960)

1607 – The first permanent settlement was established in Jamestown by the English

1624 – King James makes Virginia a royal colony

1640 – English Quakers arrive

1662 – Church of English law established

1685 – French Huguenots began arriving settling mostly in Henrico County

1700 – Hundreds of Huguenots settled along the James River

1714-1717 – Lutherans from Germany settled in Essex County

1722 – Virginia Government allows families to live rent-free for ten years on land owned by the state.

1726 -1736– Pennsylvanian Germans and Scots Irish settled in Shenandoah Valley; Protestants from New Jersey, Maryland and Delaware settled there as well.

1732 – Scottish, Irish, Welsh and German pioneers settle the western portions of Virginia.

1737 – Yellow fever epidemic

1747 – Williamsburg capital is destroyed by fire

1745 – George Washington leads militia in battle as the French and Indian War starts

1763 – French and Indian War ends

1765 – King George III institutes the Stamp Act. Colonists must buy stamps for newspapers, calendars, and marriage licenses

1774 – George Washington and Patrick Henry attend the first Continental Congress as representatives for Virginia

1776 – Thomas Jefferson, a delegate for Virginia writes the Declaration of Independence. Virginia adopts its first constitution

1779 – Capital is moved from Williamsburg to Richmond

1781 – General Cornwallis surrenders at Yorktown

1784 – Ceded western part of territory to the U.S.

1786 – Statute of Religious Freedom passes. Virginians have the right to choose their own religion and church.

1788 – Virginia becomes the 10th U.S. State.

1793 – Influenza epidemic

1809 – Nat Turner leads slave rebellion against plantation owners. He is captured and hanged.

1859 – John Brown, an abolitionist leads the raid on Harper's Ferry to steal weapons. Robert E Lee assists in capturing him.

1861 – Virginia secedes from the Union and becomes part of the Confederacy.

1863 – West Virginia formed from 50 of Virginia's counties.

1865 – Robert E. Lee surrenders to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox ending the Civil War. The 13th amendment is ratified abolishing slavery.

1867 – Valuable coal deposits are discovered.

1870 – Virginia rejoins the Union.

1877 – Reconstruction ended

1902 – The Virginia constitution is amended to require school segregation.

1910 – Major African-American migration into Norfolk

1915 – Major African-American migration into southwestern Virginia

1920 – 19th Amendment passed give women the right to vote.

1941-1943 – Pentagon is built in Arlington

1941 – 1948 – African-American parents and students fight for equality in Virginia schools.

1950 – School desegregation begins with an African-American student enrolling at the University of Virginia law school

1954 – Segregation declared unconstitutional.

VIRGINIA VITAL RECORDS

Virginia registration of births, deaths, and marriages began on a county level in 1853 and continued until 1896. Many counties abandoned registration during the Civil War, or recorded only a small percentage of events. Marriage bonds and licensing were in place from the 1600s in Virginia, though are sporadic and fragmented. They are usually found among the county levels of records, and are often published.

Except in some independent cities, records were not kept between 1896 and 14 June 1912, when statewide registration of vital statistics began. Early records between the years 1853–1896 have been microfilmed and are available at The Library of Virginia and other sources.

VIRGINIA VITAL RECORDS ON ANCESTRY.COM

- Virginia Vital Records
- Virginia, Marriages, 1660-1800
- Virginia, Marriage Records, 1700-1850
- Virginia, Marriages, 1740-1850
- Virginia Marriages, 1851-1929 and Virginia Marriages, 1851-1929
- Virginia, Marriages of the Northern Neck of Virginia, 1649-1800
- Virginia County Records, Volume VII
- English Duplicates of Lost Virginia Records
- Early Records, Hampshire County, Virginia
- Virginia, Deaths and Burials Index, 1853-1917
- Web: Newport News, Virginia, Daily Press Obituary Index, 1898-1988
- Web: Virginia, Find A Grave Index, 1607-2012

VIRGINIA MILITARY RESOURCES ON ANCESTRY.COM

Virginia's citizens have played a part in every roll in military actions starting with Colonial Wars (1 622–1763) and continuing on through the Revolutionary War (1775-1781), the War of 1812 (1812-1815), the Mexican American War (1846-1848), the Spanish American War (1898), the Civil War (1861-1865) and both World Wars.

- Colonial Soldiers of the South, 1732-1774
- Virginia Colonial Militia, 1651-1776
- Virginia's Colonial Soldiers
- Virginia Militia in the Revolutionary War
- Virginia Soldiers of 1776
- Virginia Navy in the Revolution
- Historical Register of Virginians in the Revolution
- Revolutionary War Records: Virginia
- Virginia Militia in the War of 1812, Vol. I and Virginia Militia in the War of 1812, Vol. II
- U.S., Confederate Soldiers Compiled Service Records, 1861-1865

- U.S., Union Soldiers Compiled Service Records, 1861-1865
- U.S. National Homes for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers, 1866-1938
- U.S., Confederate Pensions, 1884-1958
- Virginia Military Records

OTHER STATE RESOURCES

- Library of Virginia: Guides to the Library's extensive collections can be found on the "Using the Collections" page. Be sure to check the Catalog Search, which offers searches of books and journals; archives and manuscripts, including 6,000 family Bible images; and images and indexes to materials in the Library's collection.
- Virginia Historical Society
- Virginia Genealogical Society
- Virginia GenWeb: Lists links to county-level genealogy pages, local genealogical societies, maps, special projects, and more.
- National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) at Philadelphia: This facility maintains records from Federal agencies and courts in Virginia, including census, military, court, naturalization, and immigration records.

Special Collections

CITY DIRECTORIES

Use the browse box in the upper right corner to determine what directories are available for your ancestor's area. If they lived in a rural area, check to see if that area was included with a larger city in the vicinity.

OTHER COLLECTIONS

- Virginia Immigrants, 1623-1666
- Virginia Huguenot Refugees, 1700
- Virginia Genealogical Society Quarterly

HELP AND ADVICE

- Virginia Family History Research
- Counties of Virginia
- Cumberland and Atlantic States Research
- The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands
- Why Southern Research Is Different, Part I and Part II

View all Virginia collections on Ancestry.com