

Using Vital Statistics Records in the Archives at the Library of Virginia

Laws requiring the recording of births and deaths in Virginia were enacted as early as 1632, when a law directed ministers or churchwardens in each parish to present a “register of all burials, christenings, and marriages” yearly at the June meeting of the court. A similar act passed in 1659 stated that “enquiries are often made for persons imported into the collonie, of whose death no positive certificate can be granted for want of registers.” Few records survive from these early decades.

In 1713 the General Assembly noted that earlier acts had “for a long time been disused” and once again directed the recording of births and deaths by the minister or clerk of each parish. A return made the same year noted that the list of births and deaths was not complete since many parishes failed to make returns “for tis a thing so new to the people that neither they care to Register their Births and Burials, nor are the Parish Clerks yet brought into a regular method of transmitting them.”

The recording of vital statistics continued to be an ecclesiastical function throughout the colonial period. With the disestablishment of the Anglican church after the American Revolution and the rise of other religious denominations, the record-keeping process for vital statistics fell more and more to the individual family. By the mid-nineteenth century, medical science began to recognize the advantages of accurate birth and mortality information in controlling and treating communicable diseases. Pressure from local and national health organizations and medical professionals resulted in the passage of vital statistics registration laws. Virginia was one of the earliest states to pass such a law.

A law requiring the systematic statewide recording of births and deaths was passed by the General Assembly on April 11, 1853. Every commissioner of revenue registered births and deaths in his district annually, at the same time that personal property subject to taxation was ascertained. The commissioner recorded births and deaths that had occurred prior to December 31 of the preceding year and returned the record to the clerk of court by June 1. Information was obtained from heads of family, physicians, surgeons, or coroners. The law imposed penalties for failing to furnish or collect the information.

The clerk of court in each locality entered the information supplied by the commissioner into registers and prepared an accompanying alphabetical index. A copy of each register was forwarded to the auditor of public accounts. The law went into effect on July 1, 1853, and continued until 1896, when an economy-conscious legislature repealed the recording provisions.

Birth and death registers in the Library of Virginia are copies of those records made by local clerks from the lists compiled by the commissioners and forwarded to the auditor of public accounts. The auditor turned the lists over to the Bureau of Vital Statistics in 1918, and the registers were later transferred to the state archives.

What the Records Show

Information found on birth and death registers changed little between 1853 and 1896. Birth registers contain headings for: date and place of birth, name of child (if named), color (if “colored,” whether slave or free), sex, whether born alive or dead, name of father or owner, father’s occupation, father’s residence (county or locality in the county), mother’s name, how many infants at this birth (whether this was a multiple birth), deformities or any circumstances of interest, name of the person giving the information, and the relation of the informant to the person born.

Death registers record: name, race, and sex of the deceased; name of the owner, if a slave; date and place of death; name of the disease or cause of death; age at death (years, months, and days); place of birth; occupation; marital status; names of parents of the deceased; name of person giving the information; and description of the informant (whether a physician, consort, head of the family, or friend).

Information is often missing from the records. If an infant had not been named at the time of birth or death, the entry would record only the surname or note “Smith, infant.” Only the month appears for the date of birth or death in some instances. On death registers, the names of parents of the deceased are frequently omitted or unreliable. Causes of death frequently are not known. When John Dublin reported the death of his friend Charles Beasley in Lancaster County in November 1896, the only information given was that Beasley was 120 years old and had died from “old age.”

An index to birth records between 1853 and 1896 is available on microfilm in the Library. The index is arranged alphabetically by surname in ten-year periods. The index lists the child’s name, the names of the father and mother, the date of birth, the county in which the birth was recorded, and the page number of the birth register for the year of birth. After locating an entry in the index, researchers should locate the county register for the birth year and examine the birth record.

There also is an index to slave births for the years 1853 through 1865. The index is arranged alphabetically by the name of the owner, overseer, employer, or informant. The slave’s name, mother’s name, date of birth, county of birth, and a page number are listed.

Although there is no statewide index to death records for the period 1853 through 1896, some county court clerks prepared indexes to births and deaths for this period. Microfilm copies of the indexes may be available among the county court records in the Library’s collection. Examine the guides to county court records in the Library to determine whether indexes are available.

The Library also holds microfilm copies of death certificates, 1912–1939, arranged chronologically by year and thereunder by month. Certificates are numbered consecutively for each year. Prior to 1932, cities are filed with the counties in which they are located. Beginning in 1932, cities and counties are filed separately, with the cities at the beginning of each month. At the end of each year’s records, there is a volume of delayed filings for that year.

An index to death certificates is available on microfilm. Obtain the year of the death and the certificate number from the index and then use the in-house finding aid to identify the appropriate reel. Although the index continues through 1954, the Library holds only those records filed from 1912 to 1939.

Online Index and Scanned Images

As a result of a public-private collaboration between the Virginia Department of Health (VDH) and Ancestry.com, more than 16 million Virginia vital records have been digitized and indexed. Scanned images of the original public documents are available online through Ancestry.com. Patrons may access the database free of charge through the Library's public access computers located on the second floor. The database is also available via Wi-Fi on a personal computer in the Library's reading rooms at www.lva.virginia.gov/public/using_collections.asp. Subscribers to Ancestry.com may access the records from their own computers anywhere.

Currently, birth and death records from 1912 to 2014, marriage records from 1936 to 2014, and divorce records from 1918 to 2014 have been scanned. There may be birth records dating back to 1864 that were filed after 1912. Nonpublic records—those that have not yet reached the required time for release—are available as an “Index Only Record.” In Virginia, death, marriage, and divorce data become public information 25 years after the event; birth data become public after 100 years.

To see an index of records scanned by Ancestry, visit the Virginia Department of Health website. Please note that the birth index on the VDH website includes location and year of birth but no other information without a subscription to Ancestry.com. Its death, marriage, and divorce index gives names only.

Other Sources

Family Records are the first sources to examine for vital statistics information. Bible records; baptismal records; school records; scrapbooks; membership records for religious, patriotic, or social societies; military records; insurance records; and a variety of other records can contain important birth and death information. The Library has a collection of family Bibles that records births, marriages, and deaths. Vital statistics about slaves belonging to a household may be recorded since it was important for the owner to document the ages of slaves for tax purposes. *A Guide to Bible Records in the Library of Virginia* (2 vols.) is available for use in the reading rooms and for checkout. Bible records can also be accessed through the Library's online Archives and Manuscripts Catalog.

Census Schedules for Virginia (1810–1880, 1900–1920) are available on microfilm in the Library. Prior to the 1850 census, only the name of the head of the household is recorded. Other household members are listed by number of each gender within certain age groups. Beginning in 1850 and continuing into the twentieth century, individuals in the household are identified by name, and their ages at their last birthdays are recorded. Information concerning place of birth of each individual and parents of each individual appear on subsequent schedules. Among the types of information recorded on the 1900–1920 schedules are the age of the individual and the month and year of birth.

Special census schedules called mortality schedules are available for the census years 1850, 1860, 1870, and 1880. These record the names and causes of death of individuals who died in the twelve months prior to May or June of the census year. They are arranged by county, and except for the 1850 mortality schedules, there is no index to the records. While post-1940 census records at present are not available for public use, information abstracted from the records is available from the U.S. Census Bureau. Details and forms are available at the U.S. Census Bureau website.

Church Records provide some of the earliest information concerning births and deaths in Virginia. Prior to the American Revolution, the Anglican church was the established church in Virginia, and vital statistics of members were recorded in local parish registers. The oldest surviving register in the Library's collection is that of Charles Parish in York County, which records some parish births and deaths from 1648 through 1789. There are twelve registers for other parishes covering various periods prior to the American Revolution, all of which are available in published form.

Other religious denominations followed various practices concerning the recording of births, deaths, baptisms, and marriages. Church records in the Library's collection are described in *A Guide to Church Records in the Archives Branch, Virginia State Library*.

Cemetery records and tombstone inscriptions also are helpful in establishing birth and death information. Records of several cemeteries in the cities of Richmond and Petersburg are available on microfilm. The Library also has a small collection of copies of records from other counties and cities. A useful guide to locating cemetery sites is an in-house notebook, *Virginia Cemeteries; A Guide to Resources*. Researchers should contact local historical societies for information concerning family cemeteries.

Newspapers are a valuable source of birth and death information, especially after the 1850s when local papers became more common. Obituaries appear more frequently than birth announcements. In most instances, there are no indexes to vital statistics recorded in local newspapers. Microfilm copies of newspapers from across Virginia are available in the Library. Newspapers published by religious denominations, such as the Baptist *Religious Herald*, the Episcopal *Southern Churchman*, and the Presbyterian *Standard*, are also helpful.

County Records often contain copies of birth and death registers, which can be found in the Library's collection of microfilm county court records. The records were maintained by the clerk of court in the locality and duplicates were forwarded to the auditor of accounts. Check the Library's website at www.lva.virginia.gov/public/local to determine whether records are available for a locality.

Availability of Records for Research

Certified copies of birth and death records beginning in 1853 are available *only* from the Office of Vital Records and Health Statistics, P.O. Box 1000, Richmond, VA 23218-1000. Details and forms are available at the Virginia Department of Health website. Researchers who visit the Library can make copies from the birth and death registers on microfilm in the collection. AncestryInstitution.com is available on the reading room computers for patron use.

Microfilm copies of vital statistics may be borrowed from the Library through the interlibrary loan system of local libraries.

Vital Records 1896–1912

There was no statewide recording of births and deaths between 1896 and 1912. To locate vital statistics during this period, consult the alternate sources described previously. Several metropolitan areas continued to keep records of births and deaths after 1896. The cities of Lynchburg, Newport News, Norfolk, Petersburg, Portsmouth, Richmond, and Roanoke, and the county of Elizabeth City kept records for all or part of the period between 1896 and 1912. Contact the public health departments in these localities for information concerning available records. Systematic statewide registration began again in June 1912.

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