

The Pursuit of Ante-Bellum Social History in Virginia: A Research Note

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Until recently, the novice Virginia social historian was apt to be most discouraged as he assayed both the extant records and the state of the social history art: both showed signs of the utmost neglect. Tales of trucks hauling away old documents or bulldozers burying "useless" records are commonplace. Archivists have files of photographs showing historical materials "stored" in damp basements and recently the state library graphically illustrated the problem by "dumping" some "saved" records into a window display case in their Richmond building. Local records clerks in counties and towns are out of storage space for old documents, and state archivists, although interested, have been unable to lend any aid. If one searches for secondary rather than primary materials, the bibliographic survey would reveal but few works on Virginia's social history, particularly in the ante-bellum period.

In both records keeping and social history research, however, the situation is beginning to change. Through the efforts of the Archivist of the State Library and the State Library Board, a program is now underway to save what is left of Virginia's local records. In 1972 a bill passed the General Assembly which gave force and funding to a program designed to inventory, microfilm, and ultimately provide research access to the local records of Virginia. In part designed to revitalize the long dormant colonial records project, it is a multiyear endeavor, and is dependent on continued funding beyond the initial grant running through 1974.¹ Many of Virginia's records are permanently lost to both researchers and the public, but with continued efforts those that do still exist may be preserved for the benefit of Virginia's historical interpreters.

The state library's good archival work cannot be expected to last if historians do not take advantage of existing materials and pursue work in social history. Active and productive historical

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research will help to convince legislators and archivists alike that efforts to preserve Virginia's documentary records are not lost. We, as historians, need to recognize, as James C. Bonner observed, that "scholarly work on local history is . . . a fertile and unworked field to which scholars . . . could devote their skills . . . for the advancement of professional knowledge."² Bonner's point is well-taken, and the possibilities for such work are innumerable. Equipped with imagination, a considerable amount of public relations, and a cooperative interlibrary loan service, access to many records may be obtained already. The questions remain, where to begin and what to look for?

The first stop for the would-be researcher is a map of Virginia. With 96 counties (excluding West Virginia), 35 cities, and 197 incorporated towns, each keeping many of its own records, one must have an understanding of the jurisdictions under which records for his chosen area might be found. For example, the records of Scottsville might variously be located in Goochland County, Albemarle County, or the town of Scottsville, itself. Those of early Greene County might be found in either Madison or Orange County Court houses. Augusta County once encompassed the entire western part of the state, including Kentucky.

Once this jurisdictional problem has been solved, one should turn to the public records surveys which were taken under the auspices of the Works Project Administration in the 1930's. As with most other states these surveys remain unpublished.³ For the most part, one needs to search through the Virginia State Library's collection of manila folders on each county or city. Listed in the surveys are not only public documents such as minutes of county courts, tax books, or land books, but also maps, pictures, newspapers and other items that were located in the public record depositories thirty-five years ago.

With a "core list" in hand, a trip to the local depositories is fundamental. Since the public records surveys were taken in the late 1930's, many court houses have moved, some have burned, others have had floods, and still others, unfortunately, have discarded old materials. A day spent in the local records office will bring the long list taken from the Public Records Surveys into perspective, although sometimes disappointingly so. While in

the local depository, be certain to enlist the cooperation of the records clerk. Virginia's courthouses are, by and large, fee offices; the records stored there are the property of the clerk and thus their cooperation is essential. Many county clerks, and the trend is increasingly prevalent, have chosen to close their records to research. Although any number of reasons may be offered for such closings, above all has been the problem of theft. Sometimes information on such closings is available at the state library; at other times only a trip to the local depositories will reveal the accessibility of the records. In any event, the legal battles involved in re-opening closed records might so unnecessarily delay research that, in the absence of positive assurances of access to the records, it seems almost fruitless to begin. Part of the state archivist's present concern is to prevent such closings, and ultimately to house material in the state library, but for the time being the records clerk's cooperation is of the utmost importance.

Equipped with a working acquaintance of the nature and availability of materials, a stop in the local library reference room will quite possibly save a number of trips to courthouses or records depositories. In the late 1940's and early 1950's, the Mormon church, for genealogical reasons, embarked on a project to microfilm local court records, council proceedings and court minutes. Virginia cooperated in the effort and received microfilm copies of the records. These are available from the state library in Richmond (often through interlibrary loan) or from the Mormon archives, although films of the latter can normally be used only in a reading room established by the church. The state library has issued a copy of a guide to their holdings and some of the holdings are listed in Richard Hale, *Guide to Photocopied Materials in the United States and Canada*.⁴

Finding the materials is perhaps the easiest task facing the historian. Using them is quite another. Although the central concern of this note is location, it is nevertheless important to know what to look for. Which records are of use? It depends, of course, on one's approach or interest. To some extent all public records are of use. Deeds and will books provide clues to land patterns, marriage patterns, family life, or social mobility. The student of governmental change will find the common council or

county court minutes indispensable. Social and political historians alike will discover occasional poll books, land books, and tax records which are fascinating not only for voting analysis but for the re-creation of social structure.⁵ Historians of black America will find the free negro registers of use, while the miscellaneous records of poor houses, fire companies, police organizations, or public health activities are of use to the urban historian.

Records are not always what they seem. Notwithstanding organizational charts and constitutional arrangements, there is a considerable mixing of both function and record, at least in the ante-bellum period. The minutes of the hustings court sometimes recorded town council activities; county courts were frequently concerned with town affairs. Such situations often arose because the same persons held two offices. In fact only in the larger towns were the aldermen (who, with the mayor and recorder, formed the hustings court) separately elected; in smaller communities they were selected from the members of the council, itself. The doubling of function meant a mixing of duty and occasionally of record. For example, the Fredericksburg Annual Report from the mayor to the council was found in the minutes of the town's hustings court. Such mixing may be exceptional but is nevertheless important to keep in mind.

Not all public records are so easily located in public or local depositories, or listed in manuscript guides. Many state level materials for social history are almost "fugitive" sources. For example, the legislative petitions, filed and boxed chronologically by city and county in the Virginia State Library, reveal a considerable amount of information about local demands, internal improvements, questions of community growth, and so forth. Only the petitions falling alphabetically between Accomac and Bedford have been calendared.⁶ These petitions must, of course, be followed by the journals of the General Assembly (House Journals) and published compilations of the Acts of Assembly to discover which petitions were acted upon.⁷ Fortunately the Acts are indexed by volume as frequently are the House Journals.

Equally rewarding are the various legislative reports. Normally published to accompany the House Journals (and bound with

them), these reports are infrequently indexed but include documents from banks, internal improvements committees, prison committees, school reports, and so forth. The reports of the Board of Public Works (on internal improvements) were occasionally published separately, and after the 1847-1848 session of the General Assembly the documents and reports were published in separate volumes.

Finally there are the executive papers. Long the haven of political historians, the executive papers also have considerable information for social historians. Unfortunately they are neither fully indexed nor calendared. The papers are filed chronologically by gubernatorial administration in the state library. For the historian working within a narrow span of years, it would be possible to look at the relevant documents. For those historians working the entire ante-bellum period, the task would be humanly impossible. Some help is available, however. W.P. Palmer, and others, have edited and printed some of the executive papers in the *Calendar of State Papers* but it is a collection that has a rather celebrative bias and is weak after 1810. The calendar is indexed in Earl G. Swem's *Virginia Historical Index*, which also indexes such repositories of genealogical and social history material as *Tyler's Genealogical and Historical Quarterly*, *William and Mary Quarterly*, *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, the *Virginia Historical Register*, and Hening's *Statutes at Large*.⁸ To supplement both calendar and index, the *Virginia Genealogist* contains a continuing calendar of the executive papers which, to this point, reaches 1781.

The most delicate task facing the Virginia social historian is the uncovering and careful use of the great numbers of public records but as with any research, the public record is but one source of Virginia's past. Newspapers, private manuscripts, secondary works, and the manuscript federal census are also of primary importance in gaining an understanding of the past. Unfortunately a detailed discussion of each is not possible here.

Newspaper files may be the most rewarding of supplemental sources. Local news or social history items were not regularly considered worthy of journalistic comment until after the 1830's or 1840's. The newspapers were purveyors of national political news, and, importantly, views. However, the discouragement of

reading volume after volume without note should not blind us to what is contained in the papers. One quickly finds that newspaper editors and letter writers have opinions — often strongly stated — on the most important issues facing any locality. Furthermore, many aspects of newspapers have been relatively untapped. Advertisements have much to say about trade or occupational data; prices are frequently published which might be of use to the discerning economic historian. Essays, travel accounts, and so forth also frequently appear.

In spite of the manifold uses of the newspaper, their very existence is problematic. Few long files of ante-bellum newspapers exist. Those that are available may be unearthed — often literally — by first consulting Cappon's *Guide* which not only locates Virginia's extant newspapers but gives a brief history of each. Cappon's guide is old, however, and must be supplemented by guides edited by Clarence Brigham, Winifred Gregory, and George Schweggeman.⁹ Even these guides must be supplemented by on-site inspections. Papers located in libraries are usually intact but those in local depositories are not so well maintained. Occasionally a long established newspaper will have a "morgue" of old papers and there are examples of historically minded county executives who either accepted or purchased newspaper files for storage and historical use.¹⁰ After all local or state depositories have been exhausted, one might turn to the commercial files of Bell and Howell's Microphoto Division which has purchased microfilm rights to many newspapers and which will happily sell reels of film.¹¹

Two remaining sources of social history deserve brief mention. Less useful than either public records or newspapers are private manuscript collections deposited in libraries or local historical societies.¹² Unfortunately, the papers are most frequently organized, if at all, for non-social historians. Topical or geographical indices are notoriously inadequate and must be supplemented by tedious cross-referencing by names gathered from census, public record, or newspapers.¹³ Once located, private manuscripts can be revealing. Account books provide trade patterns for small communities; "fugitive" diaries or an occasional manuscript history are often found. Private deposits sometimes contain public records as well. A three year span of

Lynchburg's tax records were microfilmed from a private collection and deposited in Alderman Library at the University of Virginia, and the Swem Library at the College of William and Mary purchased a private collection which included many public papers, including a day book, from the town of Fredericksburg.

Finally one must comment on the secondary materials available for social history research in Virginia. Although the temptation is to begin any project with the secondary works, the nature of local history in Virginia is such that many of the works are, at best, only marginally useful and, at worst, misleading. The overwhelming urge to celebrate rather than reconstruct and understand Virginia's past makes these secondary works suspect as a groundwork for any study. Nevertheless some excel and the secondary materials cannot be ignored. A helpful guide to such material is found in *Virginia Local History: A Bibliographic Guide*, published by the state library. These secondary materials can be supplemented by past theses and dissertations, a list of which is available in the *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* (Volume 79, January, 1971).¹⁴

After pursuing these avenues of social history research (and one cannot ignore census materials, or records in federal depositories), one may find that his task has only just begun; there remains the job of digesting the data, and its coherent presentation. Nevertheless any historical quest begins with the research. Virginia's ante-bellum social history, indeed all of Virginia's social history, needs to be researched, digested, and brought to light. The materials exist for the diligent researcher. He need not wait upon the archivists of the state to collect and index. If work is begun now the historian can convince legislators of the value of the archivists' work of collection. At the same time, he can make a valuable contribution to an understanding of Virginia's past.

NOTES

1. For the bill's proposal and a brief survey of the project, see [Commonwealth of Virginia], "Report of the State Archivist on the Study of Records-Keeping Procedures of Courts of Record in Virginia, December 1, 1971," (Richmond: Virginia State Library, n.d.). For reviews of Virginia's past records keeping projects, see Lyon G. Tyler, "The Preservation of Virginia History," *North Carolina Historical Review*, III (1926), pp. 529-538; and Julian P. Boyd, "A New

Guide to the Indispensable Sources of Virginia History," *William and Mary Quarterly*, Series 3, XV (1958), pp. 3-13.

2. James C. Bonner, "Plantation and Farm: The Agricultural South," in *Writing Southern History: Essays in Historiography in Honor of Fletcher M. Green*, edited by Arthur S. Link and Rembert W. Patrick (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), p. 174.

3. All of North Carolina's surveys are published but for Virginia, only the surveys for Amelia, Brunswick, Chesterfield, Dinwiddie, Isle of Wight, Middlesex, Powhatan, Prince George, and Southampton Counties are published. A published listing of some of the surveys is found in the *Virginia Genealogist*, III — (1959 —). Volume XVII (1973) had carried the list through Marshall County.

4. See [Virginia State Library], *Lists of Court Records of the Virginia Counties and Cities on Microfilm in the Archives Division*, Two Volumes (Xerox copy, Richmond, 1969), and Richard W. Hale, Jr., *Guide to Photocopied Historical Materials in the United States and Canada* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1961), pp. 156-64.

5. For a recent example of such political-social history, see Norman K. Risjord, "How the 'Common Man' Voted in Jefferson's Virginia," in *America: The Middle Period, Essays in Honor of Bernard Mayo*, edited by John B. Boles (Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 1973), pp. 36-64.

6. H.J. Eckenrode, editor *Fifth Annual Report of the Library Board, Calendar of Legislative Petitions Arranged by Counties, Accomac-Bedford* (Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1908).

7. Colonial and early national period acts are found in William Waller Hening, editor, *Statutes at Large, Being a Collection of all the Laws of Virginia (1619-1792)*, 13 volumes (Richmond: Samuel Pleasants, 1809-1823), and supplemented by Samuel Shepherd, editor, *The Statutes at Large of Virginia, from the October Session 1792, to the December Session 1806, Inclusive*, 3 volumes (Richmond: Samuel Shepherd, 1835). After 1806 the acts were published annually or bi-annually in separate volumes.

8. See W.P. Palmer, H.W. Flournoy, et al., editors, *Calendar of Virginia State Papers and Other Manuscripts ... Preserved at Richmond (1652-1869)*, 11 volumes (Richmond: 1875-1893); Earl G. Swem, "A Bibliography of Virginia," *Virginia State Library, Bulletin*, VIII, nos. 2-4; X, nos. 1-4; XII, nos. 1-2; XVII, no. 2 (1915-32).

9. Lester J. Cappon, editor, *Virginia Newspapers, 1821-1935: A Bibliography with Historical Introduction and Notes* (New York and London: D. Appleton-Century Company, Inc., for The Institute for Research in the Social Sciences, University of Virginia, 1936). See also, Clarence S. Brigham, *History and Bibliography of American Newspapers, 1690-1820*, 2 volumes (Worcester, Mass.: American Antiquarian Society, 1947), Winifred Gregory, editor, *American Newspapers, 1821-36: A Union List of Files Available in the United States and Canada* (New York: The H.W. Wilson Company, 1937), and George A. Schwegmann, Jr., compiler, *Newspapers on Microfilm*, Sixth Edition (Washington: Library of Congress, 1957).

10. For example, Augusta County Court House has a long file of the county newspapers dating from the 1830's to the present. On the other hand, Fredericksburg's town council rejected an offer to purchase a file of the *Virginia*

Herald, long a mainstay of the town. See [Fredericksburg, Virginia] "Minutes of the Common Council," September 22, 1836.

11. For further information on the services of Microphoto, write The Micropublishers, Micro-Photo Division, Bell & Howell Company, Old Mansfield Road, Wooster, Ohio, 44691.

12. The best guide to these is, of course, the Library of Congress Union Catalog of Manuscripts. A shorter but handy reference is Philip M. Hamer, editor, *Guide to the Manuscript Collections in Depositories of the United States and Canada* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961).

13. There are exceptions to this index problem. The Virginia Historical Society has a magnificent index to all of its collections, and the Virginia Baptist Historical Society has a card index for the Richmond *Religious Herald* through the Civil War.

14. Douglas Tanner of the Manuscripts Department of the University of Virginia is engaged in an on-going effort to keep this list of dissertations and theses up to date.