

Probing Virginia's Past: Online Probate Record Database, 1740-1810

After the death of Daniel Tebbs of Westmoreland, Virginia, in 1763, the court appointed three local men—John Newton, Bradley Garner, and Richard Jackson—to list his possessions and assess the value of each item. The inventory included a spinning wheel, 13 pewter plates, and “1 horse call’d Sterling.” Also listed, scattered among the livestock and farm equipment, are twenty-two slaves, including “Negro Boy Sam” valued at £35, “old Frank” valued at £12, and “Young Nan” valued at £45. Reading this list carefully, we can start to ask and answer important questions about life in eighteenth-century Virginia and life in early America. How was property valued? What items were expensive? Why was “refin’d Sugar” listed as a separate item? What kinds of work did women in this house do? What goods did Tebbs produce and what did he purchase? What can we learn about the lives of slaves—the work they did and how their labor was valued? How diverse was the slave population in terms of age, gender, and skill level?

Probate records such as this one provide valuable information about the lifestyles of people during the colonial and early national periods. Such listings of possessions, from a time when household goods were not widely mass-produced, illuminate a family’s routines, rituals, and social relations, as well as a region’s economy and connection to larger markets. They also shed light on attitudes and policies toward slavery. For famous people, these records enrich our knowledge and understanding of their daily lives and values. For ordinary people, they offer a rare glimpse into their lived experience. These records also provide an opportunity to engage in comparative studies with other eras and to analyze how culture changes over time.

The Center for History and New Media (CHNM) at George Mason University (GMU), together with Gunston Hall Plantation (GHP), requests a grant of \$9,944 from the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities to create an online searchable database of more than 300 Tidewater region probate records dating from 1740 to 1810. Gathered and transcribed by GHP in the 1990s, these records offer a representative view of life in the Tidewater region across seventy years, from elite households to modest ones. They serve as a vital source of information for family history, women’s history, genealogy, material culture, and local history and they are one of the richest sources of information about slaves. But beyond the individuals and families recorded here, the lives and possessions of Virginia residents are invaluable for understanding life during a critical era, a time of dramatic political, social, and economic change. Virginia, home of the first permanent settlement and of many founding fathers, has played a central role in U.S. history and is studied in depth in all U.S. history courses. These probate records provide unique primary sources for studying the social, gender, intellectual, and economic history of early America.

At present, however, this rich resource remains largely inaccessible. For researchers, probate records are a difficult and time-consuming source to use; for the general public, they are nearly impossible to navigate. Using probate records requires extended trips to courthouses to look at original documents or many hours culling through microfilm. Once located, these handwritten records are often difficult to decipher and they include a variety of spellings and material categorizations. Gunston has made some prior efforts to make the material available in digital form—primarily through a CD-ROM. But because of budget limitations and technical problems, the results have been unsatisfactory; this valuable material has not reached its intended, and potential, audience.

Funding for *Probing Virginia's Past* will allow us to create a user-friendly, free website that provides easy access to these resources as well as interpretation and tools for using them. The

website will offer three main features: *Interpreting Probate Records*, *Exploring the Records*, and *Teaching with Probate Records*. The website will translate the nomenclature of this specialized database and further the study and knowledge of Virginia history and early American history among the general public and academics. The database will offer transcribed probate records as well as images of the hand-written originals. Equally important, through browse pages and a sophisticated advanced search, this project will make all of the information on the probate records easy to locate and fully searchable. Users will be able to quickly sort, categorize, and compare this wealth of information.

Probing Virginia's Past will meet the needs of humanities scholars, teachers, and the general public by making materials easy to access and use and by developing interpretive tools. In order to better understand the audience of potential users, we spoke with museum specialists, academics, teachers, teacher educators, historical associations, and researchers at various levels. The enthusiastic response we received was overwhelming and is represented by letters of support from the Afro-American Historical Association of Fauquier County, the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, and Teaching American History Project Director Eleanor Greene, as well as humanities scholars, museum curators, and researchers. (See *Appendix A for Letters of Support*.)

The first section, *Interpreting Probate Records*, will introduce researchers, teachers, and the general public to probate records as a historical source. A background essay, written by Dr. Rosemarie Zagarri (George Mason University) and Dr. Barbara Clark Smith (National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution), will provide historical context, explaining, for example, that probate records were created to assess the wealth of an individual at the time of his or her death. (See *Appendix A for Letters* and *Appendix B for Curriculum Vitae*.) This section will discuss how to analyze a probate record. What do the objects owned by one individual tell you about how he or she lived? What can you surmise about a family's values based on this list of possessions? How might certain items have been used? This section will also model these skills, a highly effective way to help users learn to engage with a complex resource. CHNM is experienced in teaching non-specialists how to analyze and make sense of different types of historical evidence.¹ (See *Appendix C*.) Drawing on this knowledge, we will conduct interviews with humanities scholars Drs. Zagarri and Smith to model how to use probate records as historical documents.

The second section, *Exploring the Records*, will allow users two ways to access the material in the database. First, *Browse the Records*, will offer users a way to browse through all 325 probate records—containing more than 65,000 individual objects—by county, time period, and object category, such as food or clothing. This will be especially valuable for users who want to explore the probates but have not identified specific search terms. Second, for researchers with a specific goal in mind, *Search the Records* will offer an advanced, full-text search portal. Having both browse pages and an advanced search will allow users with different needs to quickly and easily obtain the information they desire. For example, a user can quickly identify men or women

¹ See, for example, an interview on analyzing Manifest Records with GMU History Professor Wendi Manuel-Scott at <http://chnm.gmu.edu/wwh/analyzing/manifest/manifestintro.html>. See also the award-winning websites *History Matters* (<http://historymatters.gmu.edu>) and *World History Matters* (<http://chnm.gmu.edu/worldhistorymatters>), specifically the features entitled *Making Sense of Evidence* (<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/browse/makesense/>), *Analyzing Documents* (<http://chnm.gmu.edu/worldhistorysources/whmdocuments.html>), and *Analyzing Evidence* (<http://chnm.gmu.edu/wwh/wwhsources.html>).

in Fairfax County who owned slaves in 1740. These findings can then be compared with records from 1810 or from another part of the Tidewater region. Currently no probate record database allows for this type of comparison.

The final section, *Teaching with Probate Records*, will focus on teacher education, helping educators enrich both the content and analytical sophistication of their lessons by incorporating these primary sources in the classroom. Significantly, the sources that *Probing Virginia's Past* would make available relate specifically to Virginia Standards of Learning (SOLs) and National History Standards, addressing both skills and content areas.² History teachers are eager to use primary sources, but often are unsure how to do so. Since they are likely to be unfamiliar with probate records, this section will offer background on how to use them. It will then offer three lesson plans (fourth grade Virginia Studies, middle school, and high school) written by dedicated teachers with advanced training in analyzing and teaching primary sources: Martha MacKenzie, Sarah Whelan, and Michael McKenna (see *Appendix B for Curriculum Vitae*). Each example will model strategies for analyzing probate records and encourage educators to create their own related lesson plans based on this website's resources.

Designing this project fits perfectly with the missions of both CHNM and GHP. Since 1994, CHNM at GMU (<http://chnm.gmu.edu/>) has used digital media and computer technology to democratize history—to incorporate multiple voices, reach diverse audiences, and encourage popular participation in presenting and preserving the past (see *Appendix C*). CHNM combines cutting edge digital media with the latest and best historical scholarship to promote an inclusive understanding of the past as well as broad historical literacy. CHNM's work has been recognized with major awards and grants from the American Historical Association, the National Humanities Center, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, the Department of Education, the Library of Congress, and the Sloan, Hewlett, Rockefeller, Gould, Delmas, and Kellogg foundations. CHNM maintains a wide range of online history projects directed at diverse topics and audiences, making them available at no cost through its website. CHNM's experience developing websites for diverse audiences will ensure that *Probing Virginia's Past* is easily accessible to all users, regardless of connection or computer setup. *Probing Virginia's Past* will be maintained on CHNM's server indefinitely.

GHP promotes research in the field of eighteenth-century studies and seeks to educate the general public about George Mason and his legacy. Gunston Hall compiled this database as a means of discovering the material culture of Mason's home through probate records of contemporary Virginians. Collaborating with CHNM at George Mason's name-sake university allows GHP to share their probate research with both specialists and non-specialists throughout Virginia and around the world, and promote the study of Virginia's past. *Probing Virginia's Past* also seeks to increase GHP's outreach beyond their annual visitation of 40,000 persons per year and make their invaluable database of probate records—only 50 copies have been distributed to date—available and accessible to anyone with Internet access. This project will heighten their visibility by reaching a larger audience on the web than could ever visit their historic site in person. Increasing access to these records helps educate the public about the legacy of George Mason and his era, encourages research and historical inquiry in eighteenth-century studies, and offers scholars and teachers easy access to primary sources on Virginia history and U.S. history.

² See, for example, Virginia Standards of Learning skills (VUS1), "identify, analyze, and interpret primary and secondary source documents," and content areas (VS4) "demonstrate knowledge of life in the Virginia Colony."

Probing Virginia's Past is a collaborative project, and we have assembled a strong team of humanities scholars and technology specialists to complete this work on time and within budget. Below is a list of the key project personnel. (See Appendix B for Curriculum Vitae.)

Kelly Schrum, Project Director, will oversee all aspects of the project. She will be responsible for ensuring that all work is high quality and is completed on time and within budget. Schrum is Director of Educational Projects at CHNM and Assistant Research Professor in the Department of History at GMU. She has worked extensively in the areas of new media and history content development and served as Co-Director for two major websites funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities: *World History Sources* and *Women in World History*. She received her Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins University and is the author of *Some Wore Bobby Sox: The Emergence of Teenage Girls' Culture, 1920-1950* and co-author of *History Matters: A Student Guide to U.S. History Online*.

Kevin Shupe, Gunston Hall Coordinator, will provide microfilm of all original probate records and convert all existing Word Perfect and PDF documents into standard text HTML files. He will advise on all aspects of the project. Shupe has been the Library, Internet, and Technology Manager at Gunston Hall since 1997. Among his responsibilities is the overseeing of Gunston Hall's extensive website. He has a Master's Degree in Library and Information Science and a Master's Degree in Internet Strategy Management. Currently he is a PhD student in American History at GMU.

Barbara Clark Smith, is a Curator in the Division of Social History, National Museum of American History Behring Center, Smithsonian Institution where she has worked since 1983. Smith will work on *Interpreting Probate Records*, modeling interpretation of probate records and co-writing the background essay. Her research ranges from the material culture of household life to forms of popular participation in the era of the American Revolution. Dr. Smith has curated exhibitions on such topics as household and community life in the early republic, costume and the construction of gender, and the history of housework. Her publications include *After the Revolution: The Smithsonian History of Everyday Life in the Eighteenth Century*; "Food Rioters and the American Revolution"; and "Revolution in Boston."

Rosemarie Zagarri, Professor of History, GMU, received her PhD from Yale University. Zagarri will work on *Interpreting Probate Records*, modeling interpretation of probate records and co-writing the background essay. The author of *The Politics of Size: Representation in the United States 1776-1850* and *A Woman's Dilemma: Mercy Otis Warren and the American Revolution*; she is also the editor of *David Humphreys' Life of General Washington with George Washington with George Washington's 'Remarks.'* She has published articles in *The Journal of American History*, *The William and Mary Quarterly*, *American Quarterly*, and *Reviews in American History*. In the spring of 1993, the Fulbright Commission appointed her Thomas Jefferson Chair in American Studies at the University of Amsterdam. In 1997-98, she received a research Fellowship for College Teachers from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Martha MacKenzie, Elementary School Teacher, Winchester City Public Schools, has thirteen years of experience in public schools as a media specialist, middle, and elementary school teacher. She will write the fourth grade lesson plan.

Sarah Whelan, Middle School Teacher, Alexandria City Public Schools, received a Master's degree in teaching from University of Virginia and a post-graduate licensure in history and social studies. She will be responsible for the middle school lesson plan.

Micahel McKenna, High School Teacher, Culpeper County Public Schools, received a Master's degree in secondary education. He currently teaches AP U.S. history and will write the high school lesson plan.

In addition, an advisory team of humanities scholars and new media specialists will provide assistance in shaping the project to serve the needs of general, museum, and academic audiences. (*See Appendix A for Letters of Support; Appendix B for Curriculum Vitae.*)

Gloria Seaman Allen, Adjunct Professor at Mount Vernon and Mary Washington Colleges

Susan Borchardt, Assistant Director of Collections and Education, Gunston Hall Plantation

Barbara Farner, Gunston Hall, Research Assistant, Room Use Study Project

Martha Katz-Hayman, Associate Curator, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

Roy Rosenzweig, Director, CHNM and Professor of History and New Media at GMU

Amanda Shuman, Webmaster, Center for History & New Media at George Mason University

Plan of Work, January 2006-December 2006

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| Jan-Mar | Convert database from Access to MySQL; Assess nomenclature from specialist database and add metadata to database to make records more accessible for general user; Design home page and site structure, including <i>Browse</i> , <i>Search</i> , search results, and final record display pages; Request evaluation and approval of design by advisory board; Convert all probate records to simple text for full text searching capabilities (currently in WordPerfect and PDF format); Begin digitizing images of probate records from original microfilm. |
| April-June | Program <i>Browse the Records</i> and <i>Search the Records</i> pages; Program search results and final record display pages; Finish metadata entry into database including text of all probate records for full-text searching; Develop materials for <i>Interpreting Probate Records</i> page; Test and evaluate browse and search pages with advisory board, scholars, and general users; Review lesson plans submitted by teachers; Make changes to website to improve functionality and accessibility. |
| July-Sept | Design and program <i>How to Use the Site</i> , <i>Contact</i> , and <i>About this Project</i> pages; Design and program <i>Teaching with Probate Records</i> page, including lessons; Conduct usability study with advisory board, selected teachers, and selected general users; Design publicity materials and draft press releases; Make changes as necessary. |
| Oct-Dec | Design and program online survey for gathering information from users to the site; Send out press releases, postcards, and emails announcing the website and solicit feedback; Prepare and present panels on the website at conferences; Revise website as necessary. |

December 2006—CHNM will maintain the site on its server indefinitely.

Publicity and Evaluation

Through print and online means, CHNM and GHP will promote the launching of *Probing Virginia's Past*. CHNM has considerable strength in online promotion and currently attracts a large and regular audience including humanities scholars, history students and teachers, and enthusiasts. Operating one of the most visited history websites, with 400 million hits, 22 million

page views, and 8 million visitors annually, puts CHNM in an excellent position to promote *Probing Virginia's Past* to national and international audiences. Other specialist audiences will be reached through postings to online mailing lists, such as H-Net, Museum-L, Museum-Ed, and *History News Network's* online history news magazine. With more than a decade of experience in promoting web-based projects, CHNM excels at optimizing search engines and directory placement, both crucial to bringing traffic to a website.

In addition, CHNM and GHP will submit press releases and articles to media outlets serving Virginia, such as the *Washington Post*, *The Journal Newspapers*, *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, and *Virginian Pilot*. To reach historians and museum specialists, project personnel will also send press releases and articles to *Perspectives* (American Historical Association), *Museum News*, *History Teacher*, and *Magazine of History* (Organization of American Historians). Colorful postcards will announce the new site to GHP members and be available at GHP for visitors and researchers. In addition, CHNM will distribute postcards to all teachers participating in their *Teaching American History* grants and mail them to all Virginia social studies coordinators. During conferences of the American Historical Association, Organization of American Historians, and Virginia Council of Social Studies, CHNM staff will make presentations and host panels that feature this new online resource, encouraging scholars to use the records for their own research and teachers to explore them for classroom use. Combining direct mail, print, conference presentations, and online promotion will ensure a wide audience for *Probing Virginia's Past*.

To gauge whether *Probing Virginia's Past* accomplishes its goals, CHNM will evaluate the project in various ways. First, CHNM will conduct a usability study before the website goes public. This allows key personnel to redesign or adapt the site to different types of user needs. Second, CHNM staff will track site visitation and patterns of use through web log analysis. By analyzing visitor behavior and numbers, project personnel will judge the success of the site. After launching the site, *Probing Virginia's Past* will offer users an optional online survey where they can comment and provide feedback. This survey will ask users to identify their reason for visiting, what features they used, and if they found what they were looking for. Those results will assist project staff to assess the needs of general users versus those of specialists. We plan to apply for additional funding to add new probate records to this substantial collection and to train scholars, teachers, and members of the public to use probate records effectively.

Currently, the web is the best medium for increasing access to historical documents. Converting the nomenclature of a large, specialized database of compelling but complicated primary sources into a website accessible for general users requires extensive technical experience and the ability to use sound humanities scholarship to translate the historical context of these documents. The Center for History and New Media and Gunston Hall Plantation are perfectly poised to make *Probing Virginia's Past* a valuable and successful resource for all audiences with assistance from the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities.