

FINAL REPORT

Probing Virginia's Past: Online Probate Record Database, 1740-1810
(<http://chnm.gmu.edu/probateinventory>)

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Report covering from December 9, 2005 to March 31, 2007

In December 2005, The Center for History and New Media (CHNM) at George Mason University (Mason), together with Gunston Hall Plantation (GHP), received a grant of \$9,950 from the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities to create an online searchable database of 325 Tidewater region probate inventories dating from 1740 to 1810. These inventories 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. Over the past year, *Probing Virginia's Past: Online Probate Record Database, 1740-1810*, has grown from an idea to a valuable resource for United States history scholars and teachers. Our efforts to convert transcribed data that GHP gathered in the 1990s into a user-friendly, free website and to add facsimiles of all available probates have provided easy access to these otherwise difficult to access records. In addition, we have included valuable historical context, such as interviews with scholars, as well as lesson plans prepared by experienced teachers to make these probate inventories accessible to a broad audience.

In the final eight months of the project, we completed work on the remaining content and technical aspects of the site. We digitized the remaining inventories; refined the search feature; finalized teachers' lesson plans; and completed production on the multimedia guides to interpreting probate inventories. In addition, several changes were made to increase site usability. Foremost, in consultation with scholars from Gunston Hall, we revised the name of the site from *Probing Virginia's Past: Online Probate Record Database, 1740-1810* to *Probing the Past: Virginia and Maryland Probate Inventories, 1740-1810*. While the bulk of the records are from plantations in Virginia, this new name better reflects the scope of the site, and clarifies its focus on probate inventories. Additionally, after testing site usability, we integrated the quick search with the advanced search to streamline searching. We also included images of the probate inventory transcriptions alongside the facsimile pages to facilitate reading for a general audience unfamiliar with 18th-century script.

Probing the Past: Virginia and Maryland Probate Inventories, 1740-1810 now offers United States history scholars, teachers, and students access to a valuable body of resources for augmenting study and curricula. This fall and winter, we began to publicize the site, presenting at two teachers' conferences, sending publicity postcards, and notifying relevant listservs and websites. Accordingly, site usage has increased dramatically in the past three months, and our efforts are successfully facilitating public use of these rich resources for understanding Virginia's past. Given the strong user base our site is attracting, our goal is to become a model for presenting probate inventories—too often confined in local archives and on microfilm—on the web, to inspire and facilitate similar sites. Below is a more detailed explanation of what has been accomplished.

PROJECT CONTENT AND SCOPE

Browse/Search the Inventories offers two ways to access the 325 probate inventories. First, *Browse the Inventories* (<http://chnm.gmu.edu/probateinventory/browse.php>) allows all 325 inventories to be browsed by county and by time period, facilitating access for those interested both in regional and chronological comparisons. For more advanced researchers, *Search the Inventories* (<http://chnm.gmu.edu/probateinventory/search.php>) offers a full-text search portal, including a keyword search that works in combination with searches on jurisdiction, date, female/male held estates, slave holding estates, and rural/non-rural estates. These categories allow users to quickly identify, for example, men or women in Fairfax County who owned slaves between 1740 and 1750. The keyword search allows researchers to quickly locate relevant objects listed in the inventories, such as a “silver teapot” or “oznabrig thread.” In addition, we have included a Search Term Glossary to help users identify specific objects within categories relevant to their interests, such as and irons for heating or salvers for serving dessert.

After a search is completed, both transcriptions and facsimiles of the inventories can be displayed. Based on site usability tests, we realized that displaying transcriptions alongside facsimile pages was essential for those unfamiliar with probate inventories and 18th-century script. Switching between the transcribed page and facsimile page allows users to quickly glean specific information from probate inventories while simultaneously familiarizing them with the original primary source document. In addition, we have included a downloadable PDF of the transcribed record so that users can use their PDF-viewer search capabilities to locate specific search terms within each inventory.

Interpreting the Collection (<http://chnm.gmu.edu/probateinventory/interpret.php>) introduces researchers, teachers, and the general public to probate inventories as historical sources. This section consists of two multimedia guides that model strategies for analyzing probate inventories, including close reading and providing historical context. Each multimedia guide focuses on one probate inventory, and explains how objects owned by one individual can illuminate the rituals and social relations of 18th-century families in Virginia, as well as the region’s economy and connection to larger markets. This focus on specific inventories helps users learn to engage with a complex resource.

Interpreting Moore Fauntleroy

(<http://chnm.gmu.edu/probateinventory/interpreting/moore.php>) combines an interview with Dr. Barbara Clark Smith (National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution) with images from Moore Fauntleroy’s probate inventory (from Richmond County, Virginia in 1791) and illustrations of objects in his inventory and daily life in the late 1800s drawn from a diverse body of books, libraries, and online collections. Smith first introduces this rich source and discusses the role of probate inventories in general, establishing that they were records collected by county courts to assess the wealth of an individual at the time of his or her death. Smith then builds historical context for understanding Moore Fauntleroy’s probate inventory, and uses objects within the inventory to discuss aspects of daily life, work, slavery, social relations, and the household’s connection to the larger Tidewater economy. Her discussion of teaching

strategies makes the guide especially relevant for teachers who have not used probate inventories in their classrooms in the past.

Interpreting Sarah Green combines an interview with Dr. Rosemarie Zagarri (George Mason University) with images from Sarah Green's probate inventory (from York County, Virginia, 1759) and illustrations of objects in her inventory and daily life in the mid-1800s. Zagarri focuses on the unique status of this probate inventory—very few probate inventories from this time period record women's possessions—and uses the objects in the inventory to paint a picture of Sarah Green's life. Zagarri first focuses on strategies for reading probate inventories, especially helpful for those non-specialists interested in understanding arcane words, 18th-century writing conventions, and the value of different types of objects in the mid-1700s. She then uses objects in the inventory to emphasize the roles of slaves and women in early Virginia. Though the interview with Zagarri is complete, we are waiting for the receipt of several illustrations central for the multimedia guide, and expect that it will be public in the coming weeks.

Teaching Probate Inventories (<http://chnm.gmu.edu/probateinventory/teach.php>) focuses on teacher education, helping educators enrich both the content and analytical sophistication of their lessons by incorporating probate inventories in their classrooms. This section offers three lesson plans written by dedicated teachers with advanced training in analyzing and teaching primary sources. Each example, based on one of the two inventories in the *Interpreting* section, models strategies for analyzing probate records and encourages educators to create their own related lesson plans based on this website's resources.

“What People's Stuff Can Tell You: Looking at a Colonial Probate Record” (<http://chnm.gmu.edu/probateinventory/lessons/lesson1.php>) is authored by long-time elementary school teacher Martha MacKenzie from Winchester, Virginia. Her lesson plan focuses on Sarah Green's probate inventory, and encourages fourth grade Virginia Studies students to think about their possessions, compare their possessions with Sarah Green's, and draw conclusions about Sarah Green's life.

“A Colonial Woman Speaks from the Grave: Who Was Sarah Green and What Is She Trying to Tell us?” (<http://chnm.gmu.edu/probateinventory/lessons/lesson2.php>) is authored by middle school teacher Nathan Richardson from Fauquier County, Virginia. His lesson plan presents Sarah Green's life as a mystery for middle school students to solve. They use her probate inventory to gather information about her possessions, and then engage in the practice of historical inquiry to draw conclusions about Sarah Green's life. Then, they write a textbook entry that reflects what they have learned about the daily life in colonial Virginia, focusing on those aspects of life that their textbooks did not mention.

“Plantation Life in 18th-century Virginia: Building a Picture of the Past through Probate Records” (<http://chnm.gmu.edu/probateinventory/lessons/lesson3.php>) is authored by high school teacher Michael McKenna from Culpeper, Virginia. His lesson plan focuses on Moore Fauntleroy's probate inventory, and encourages high school students to examine the inventory closely and draw a floor plan of the Fauntleroy house based on the descriptions in the inventory. Then, students draw conclusions about life in late 18th-

century Virginia, and determine whether Moore Fauntleroy's estate is typical of Southern plantations at the time.

OUTREACH AND PUBLICITY

Last fall, we began to publicize *Probing the Past* through conference presentations, postcard mailings, and targeted promotion through online websites. In October, Kristin Lehner, Multimedia Guide Developer, traveled to the Virginia Council for Social Studies Educators Conference in Richmond, Virginia, and gave a presentation entitled "Uncovering Household Culture in 18th-century Virginia: The Promise of Online Probate Inventories." The presentation highlighted the site's emphasis on Virginia history, and gave participants, most of whom were unfamiliar with probate inventories, the chance to discuss strategies for using these sources in their classrooms. Then, in December, Lehner and lesson plan author Nathan Richardson presented *Probing the Past* at the National Council for the Social Studies Conference in Washington, D.C., with a presentation entitled "Bringing 18th-Century Daily Life Into the Classroom." Lehner focused on the *Interpreting the Collection* section and strategies Dr. Smith and Dr. Zagarri suggest for understanding the inventories. Richardson presented his lesson plan, and gave participants the chance to discuss how they might modify it for their classrooms.

Outreach efforts continued in January. We mailed more than 1,000 postcards (*see Appendix A for Publicity*) to members of the Organization for American Historians who specialize in colonial America and in the mid-Atlantic region. We distributed postcards at several regional and national conferences, including the National Council for Social Studies annual conference in Washington, D.C., and the American Historical Association annual conference in Atlanta, Georgia, and distributed postcards to teachers involved in four Virginia Teaching American History projects. Specialist audiences were also reached through postings (*see Appendix A for Publicity*) to online mailing lists of teachers, researchers, and those interested in material culture and museum collections, such as common-place.org, H-Net Material Culture, H-Net South, H-Net Museum, Museum-L, and Museum-Ed. We plan to continue this site publicity in the coming months through an article in the *Mason Gazette*, which we expect to spark interest from other local media outlets. Finally, we placed advertisements in two relevant publications for reaching potential users, the Organization of American Historians publication, *Magazine of History*, and *The History Teacher*. Copies of both advertisements are included in *Appendix A*.

Reflecting these outreach and publicity efforts, *Probing the Past's* site traffic has increased substantially in the past three months. Between December 2006 and January 2007, site traffic increased dramatically—by more than 58 times. Between January and February of this year, site traffic continued to increase, with close to 1,500 unique visitors in February. This month, site traffic will surpass that number, and as we finalize site content and continue to publicize, we expect site traffic to continue growing. We have added an optional online survey to the site where users can comment and provide feedback. This feature will provide information about *Probing the Past's* audience, as well as useful information for project updates and assisting with similar projects.

SUMMARY

In sum, we believe that the grant was a success. After converting the data from the original GHP database, creating search and browse functions to facilitate access to the probate inventories, collecting and scanning facsimiles of all available inventories, and building content to support the study of these inventories, we expanded our base of regular visitors, and reached out to audiences of humanities scholars and teachers who now have the tools to better analyze these invaluable sources and incorporate them into their classroom teaching. It is our hope that others will use this site as a model for future projects that seek to make probate inventories accessible online, and we will support these future endeavors.

We would, of course, be delighted to provide more detailed information on our work and would be happy to meet with VFH staff at any convenient time.

Kelly Schrum
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Center for History and New Media
George Mason University

Appendix A: Publicity

Publicity Postcard:

The Center for History and New Media presents



**Online Probate Records,
1740-1810**

<http://chnm.gmu.edu/probateinventory>



Center for History and New Media
4400 University Drive, MS1E7
Fairfax, VA 22030

Non-Profit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Fairfax, VA
Permit No.
1532

**Probing the Past:
Online Probate Records, 1740-1810**

*A New Website from
the Center for History and New Media*

What was daily life like in the 18th century? For
slaves? For slaveowners? What objects did
people use everyday for work, eating, or play?

- Browse by time or place
- Full-text search
- Guides to using inventories
- Lesson plans

*A project of the Center for History and New Media, George Mason University and
Gunston Hall Plantation with support from the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities.*

Advertisement, *Magazine of History*:

*A new website from the
Center for History and New Media
at George Mason University*



*What was daily life like in the
18th century? For slaves? For
slaveowners? What objects did
people use everyday for work,
eating, or play?*

- Browse by time or place
- Full-text search
- Guides to using inventories
- Lesson plans



<http://chnm.gmu.edu/probateinventory>

Advertisement, *History Teacher*:



A new website from the
Center for History and New Media
at George Mason University



Probing the Past
Online Probate Records,
1740-1810

*What was daily life like in the 18th century?
For slaves? For slaveowners? What objects did
people use everyday for work, eating, or play?*

- Browse by time or place
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- Lesson plans



<http://chnm.gmu.edu/probateinventory>



Promotional Flyer:

The Center for History and New Media presents:

Probing



the



Past

Online Probate Records 1740-1810

**What was daily life like in the 18th century?
For slaves? For slaveowners? What objects did people
use everyday for work, eating, or play?**

- Browse by time or place
- Full-text search
- Guides to using inventories
- Lesson plans

<http://chnm.gmu.edu/probateinventory>

Posting to Websites and Listservs:

What was daily like life in the 18th century? For slaves? For slaveowners? What objects did people use everyday for work, eating, or play? CHNM (George Mason University) is pleased to introduce Probing the Past (<http://chnm.gmu.edu/probateinventory>), a free website that allows users to explore these questions and many more. Probing the Past presents 325 probate inventories that were recorded between 1740 and 1810 in selected Virginia and Maryland counties. Resources include digitized copies and transcriptions of the inventories, keyword and advanced searches, browsing by decade and county, two in-depth interviews with scholars on how to analyze probate inventories, and three lesson plans.

Funded by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, and completed in collaboration with Gunston Hall Plantation, Probing the Past uses material culture to illuminate the rituals and social relations of 18th-century families in Virginia and Maryland, as well as the region's economy and connection to larger markets.