

FOUND IN THE ARCHIVES, no. 20 – May 2016

Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center



Greetings! The Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center is excited to continue bringing our monthly newsletter, *Found in the Archives*, to you.

This month, we will examine the birth and death record holdings at the archives, as these records are frequently asked after by visitors. The Historic Records Center does hold these vital records, but only for certain time periods from Fairfax County's history. We will explain which years can be accessed here at the courthouse and in what form, so that if you are interested in conducting research using these record groups, you can

be better prepared for what may or may not be available.

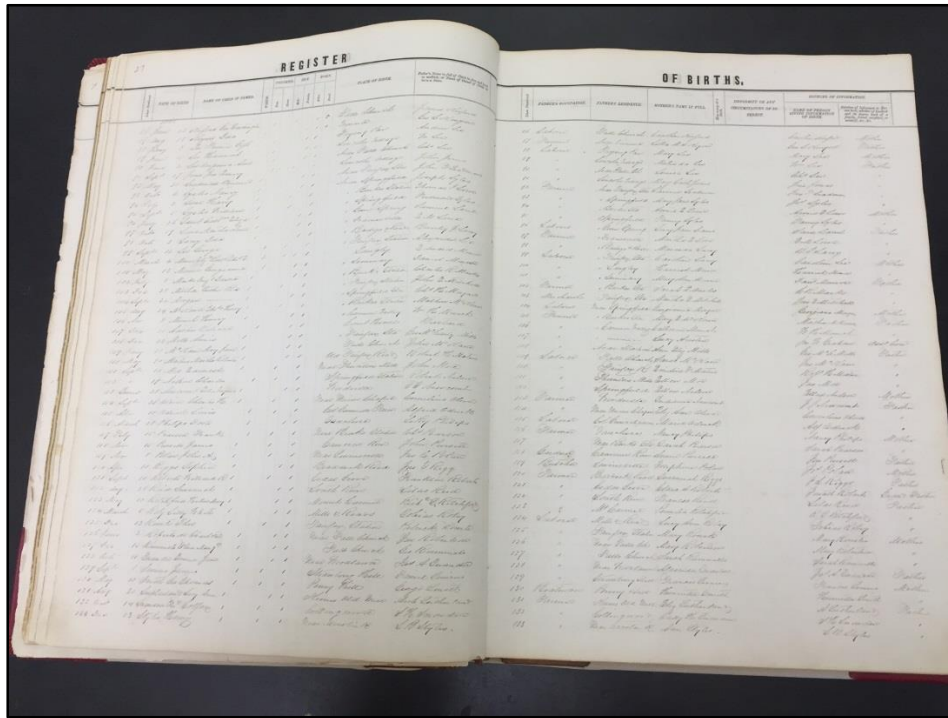
In the Commonwealth of Virginia, birth and death records were not recorded by the government prior to 1853. The local church parishes were often the locations where these life events were recorded, or perhaps in a family's personal Bible. In 1853, Virginia passed a law that instructed each county's Commissioner of the Revenue to determine which households had seen births or deaths, as part of ascertaining the family's taxable property for that year. The Commissioner of the Revenue received three cents by the county for every birth and death that he recorded. After the Commissioner completed his audit for each year, a copy was sent to the court and held by the Clerk of Court. The Clerk then forwarded an official copy to the Auditor of Public Accounts in Richmond.¹

The above law applied for the years 1853 to 1869. The Historic Records Center is in possession of two ledger books, one for births and one for deaths, for these sixteen years. Due to the Civil War, however, the years 1861 to 1865 were not recorded, as normal county operations were significantly reduced and even suspended during this time.



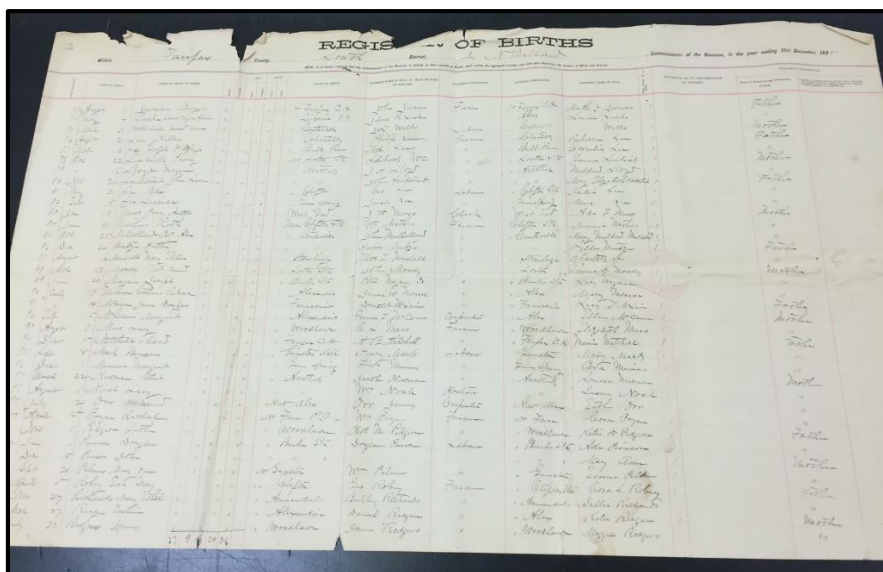
¹ *Code of Virginia 1860*, Title 31: Marriages, Divorce, and Dower, Chapter CVIII: Of Marriages, Births, and Deaths, pp. 523-529.

Below is a photograph of the interior of the "Register of Births":



The birth and death registers from 185 to 1869 record the births and deaths of whites, "free colored" people, and slaves. *Keep in mind that births and deaths were self-reported to the Commissioner of the Revenue*; if the head of household did not tell the Commissioner about changes to the family, the information was not recorded.

In 1870, with the adoption of the new Virginia Constitution, slight changes were made in the recording process. The Commissioner of the Revenue still recorded births and deaths as he made his assessments on taxable property for the year. The Clerk of Court received this information and made a copy for the Auditor of Public Accounts in Richmond. Instead of relatively small ledgers, however, the Commissioner had to use very large forms that (we believe) had been bound at one time:



Unfortunately, due to the size of these sheets of paper and poor storage conditions over 150 years, our birth and death registers from 1870-1897 are incomplete. Still, despite some damage and age, they are a good resource to check if you suspect that you have an ancestor who was born or who died in Fairfax County during this period.

After the summer of 1897, the recording of births and deaths in the Commonwealth of Virginia stopped for nearly 15 years. In 1885, an act was passed to pay Confederate veterans pensions from state funds, and by 1897, Virginia had to decide whether they would continue to record births and deaths, or pay Confederate pensions. Virginia chose to pay the pensions, and the recording of births and deaths stopped, as there was now no law mandating their recordation. Because of this, from June 1897 until June 1912, no birth and death records are available in any county in Virginia.

Virginia's Office of Vital Statistics was founded in 1912, and the process for recording births and deaths at the county level was formalized at that time. Our last set of birth and death records cover the years 1912-1917. Local county registrars issued blank forms to "those who required them" (presumably doctors, midwives, and parents). The registrar would then send the complete forms to the Clerk of Court. The Clerk would then forward the certificates to the Office of Vital Statistics in Richmond. After 1917, the county court no longer kept birth and death records.

Here is an example of a birth record for 1917:

1600-9-26-16

MARGIN RESERVED FOR BINDING
 WRITE PLAINLY, WITH UNFADING INK (WRITING FLUID). THIS IS A PERMANENT RECORD.
 N. B.—In case of TWINS OR TRIPLETS use a SEPARATE BLANK for each child, and mark the FIRSTBORN, No. 1; THE OTHERS, No. 2, etc., in question 4.

CERTIFICATE OF BIRTH
 COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA
 Bureau of Vital Statistics
 State Board of Health

File No.—For State Registrar Only.

1 PLACE OF BIRTH
 County of Fairfax
 Magisterial District of St. Leon
 or
 Inc. Town of _____ Registration District No. 292 Registered No. 31
 or (For use of Local Registrar)
 City of _____ (No. _____ St. _____ Ward _____)
 (If birth occurs in a hospital or other institution, give name of same instead of street and number.)

2 Full Name of Child
 (Do not write in this space if child is not yet named; make supplemental report as directed.)

3 BOY OR GIRL Boy 4 Twin or Triplet? _____ 5 Number in order of birth _____ 6 Are Parents Married? yes 7 DATE OF BIRTH Aug 20 1917
 (To be answered only in event of Twins or Triplets) (Name of Month) (Day) (Year)

8 FULL NAME OF FATHER Robert Arnold 14 FULL NAME BEFORE MARRIAGE OF MOTHER Jennie Cook

9 PRESENT ADDRESS OF FATHER New Alex Va 15 PRESENT ADDRESS OF MOTHER New Alex Va

10 WHITE OR COLORED White 11 AGE AT LAST BIRTHDAY 43 (Years) 16 WHITE OR COLORED White 17 AGE AT LAST BIRTHDAY 40 (Years)

12 BIRTHPLACE Alex Va 18 BIRTHPLACE Alex Va

13 OCCUPATION Farmer 19 OCCUPATION Housewife

20 Number of children born to this mother, including present birth 13 21 Number of children of this mother now living, including present birth 13

CERTIFICATE OF ATTENDING PHYSICIAN OR MIDWIFE*
 22 I hereby certify that I attended the birth of this child, who was Born alive, at 9 A. M., on the date above stated. (Born Alive or Stillborn) (Hour A. M. or P. M.)

23 (Signature) Walter A. Vanfield 24 State whether Physician or Midwife Physician 25 Address of Physician or Midwife Alex Va

26 Witness (Signature of Witness necessary only when question 23 is signed by mark)

27 Filed Aug 21 1917 28 Wm. J. H. B. Jones
 (Date received by Registrar) (LOCAL REGISTRAR)

REGISTRAR

*When there was no attending physician or midwife, then the father, householder, etc., should make this return. If a child breathes even once, it must not be reported as stillborn. No report is desired of stillbirths before the fifth month of pregnancy.

Though the Historic Records Center's records of births and deaths are incomplete, we treasure each record that survives as it may help someone fill in the missing piece of their family puzzle.

If you have any questions of these or other records held at the Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center, please call 703-246-4168 or email us at historicalrecords@fairfaxcounty.gov.