A Case Study in Court Loose Papers: Loudoun County Clerk of the Circuit Court Archives http://www.loudoun.gov/Default.aspx?tabid=1062

Entries in Court Order Books of any county record action on matters brought before the judges. Loose papers are the original documents that were presented in court for documentation. Reading the court order books of a county or working in the loose papers can be a time consuming and tedious process, yet it is there that the issues of everyday life are found which help to put flesh on an ancestor's bones. Often, loose papers contain information that is difficult to find elsewhere. For example, business licenses would be recorded in the Court Order Books but the actual license with a possible signature of an ancestor would be found in loose papers.

At face value, the website for Loudoun County's Clerk of the Court Archives holds a wealth of information for researchers who may have had an ancestor live in the county. Gary Clemens, Clerk of the Circuit Court and John Fishback, the Historic Records Manager have created and posted indexes for many of the records found among the loose papers of the court. From these index entries, copies of individual records can be ordered. For anyone with Loudoun County ancestors the value to that researcher is obvious, this website was chosen, however, for its educational value to any Virginia researcher. What is important to a non Loudoun County researcher is that the records indexed on this site could be found in other Virginia county court records.

The breadth of life that these indexes cover is immense; vital records, business records, military records, court cases and records pertaining to African Americans, both as free people of color and slaves. Every genealogist seeks information on vital records; the birth, death, and marriage record indexes found on this site cover the late 19th and into the early 20th century. This site also goes go an extra mile with its 2 indexes for base born children (those born out of wedlock). The separate alphabetized records for the father and mother of each baseborn child contain the year and sex of each child born. Even the index of those children who served apprenticeships may be considered a vital record alternate source since one of the columns is the age of the child.

Indexes for wills, deeds, and marriage bonds/records are very familiar to any genealogist. These online indexes, however, go far beyond that. There are separate business license indexes for grist mills, restaurants, liquor sales, ordinary licenses and a category called Retail Licenses. The last index contains licenses issued to the man who wanted to sell drugs, jewelry, dry goods or merchandise manufactured outside the US. Even the man who wanted to run a circus had to have a license and can be found in this index.

The Alien Index includes those who applied for Naturalization Papers in the 19th and early 20th century with information pertaining to country of origin etc. While the naturalizations would be recorded in the COB, the application which may contain information vital to genealogical research is found in the loose papers.

Military records include the American Revolution records and those from the Civil War. The American Revolution index covers soldiers, pension applications and those who received

payments for goods and services to the supplied to the Army (public claims). The Civil War records contain primarily those names are on the Confederate Roster from Loudoun County. (Mosby's Rangers are not found on this list and neither are those who served in the Union forces. Again this is a reminder that these are indexes of records found in the County Clerk's office.)

Perhaps the most intriguing of these indexes is the Index of Criminal Cases. This index includes those cases brought before the King (colonial time frame) or the Commonwealth through 1842. Here are cases for what today may be considered traditional criminal offenses such as assault, trespass, and theft. However, cases brought before the court for adultery, illegal gaming, selling liquor without a license, keeping a disorderly house, failure to keep a road in order, failure to enter one's land, lists of jurors etc. are also found in this index up to 1842.

African American researchers will find indexes for free blacks, as well as, an entire index titled Slave Issues. The latter index often only has the slave noted by a first name with the name of a master found several columns over. Many of these entries are found in fiduciary records but some are also found in various other record groups. The free black index contains not only, the names of those found on the list of free blacks but also, includes entries from Court records if an individual was noted a free black. Some names in this list have emancipation dates as well as former owners and sometimes parents' names.

The Archives site for Loudoun County aids the Virginia researcher by posting the various types of records that can be consulted to expand a search for information relative to an ancestor. Not all Virginia counties have maintained all of these records and, of course, there are numerous burned counties which have lost all or portions of their records. Some state archivists have noted that the loss of loose papers is as great a loss as the loss of deeds and wills since court records involve people from every walk of life not just the landed white males. County clerks may have kept these loose papers through the years, but, may have sent these records to the Library of Virginia for safekeeping, so if research is being conducted in a county, other than Loudoun, it is necessary to call the Clerk of the Circuit Court to get information concerning where the county loose papers are held. Most counties in Virginia do not necessarily have the staff devoted to historic records that Loudoun County has and may require a visit to the Courthouse, the Library of Virginia or the Records center in Richmond to access these papers.

This website is a wonderful resource for Loudoun County researchers. However, the volume of information found in these loose papers is an invaluable lesson for all Virginia Courthouse research. Papers held in a courthouse are so much more than deeds, wills and marriage records. In order to conduct as thorough a research as possible for Virginia ancestors, Court Order Books should be read and the loose papers that document the order books need to be consulted. Court Order Books are available through inter-library loan from the Library of Virginia.

All Virginia researchers thank Mr. John Fishback, as Historic Records Manager, for his work in compiling and posting these various indexes.