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National Archives News

The Newsletter of the Archives and Records Management Unit

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Sources of VIs Family Records

The following Offices hold Virgin Islands records relevant to **family history research.** Although they do not all have adequate space and staff to accommodate public searches, if you make an appointment, the appropriate officer would make a way to assist you with your search .

The **General Civil Registry Office** is responsible for Civil Registration. It holds records of births, marriages, deaths and wills from 1859 to present. The Anglican and Methodist Churches hold records of baptisms, marriages and deaths as follows:

Anglican Church: Baptisms, 1825-1861; Marriages, 1833-1946; Burials, 1819-1867

Methodist Church: Baptisms, 1815-1895; 1889; Marriages, 1877-1934; Burials, 1845-1896

Inland Revenue Office records ownership of houses, land and other property. Tax lists containing pertinent information are published annually.

Land Registry holds property indentifiers: indexes and Maps from 1972

Public Library: Newspapers from 1959 and various name indexes; history books

Survey Department: Ordinance 1953 Maps; Boundary Maps from 1975

The National Archives: Slave Records from 1800s, Census Records from 1700s (On Microfilm); and Wills and Deeds from the 1700s.

Wills and Deeds are sources of genealogical information. Original Wills dating from 1776-1857 and Deeds from 1753-1867 in the Archives collection are too fragile to handle but Deeds from 1905-1959 (on microfilm) can be accessed at the Archives Unit.

Wills as sources of Information

Wills are documents in which people try to exert control over their property – and their heirs – after their death. Over the centuries, what would happen to property in the absence of a will has been governed by a variety of laws and customs, generally allowing so much to support the deceased widow and other dependants, so much to go direct to the next heir, and so on. A Will gives greater scope, allowing the testator to support a wider range of people and to leave property exactly as he or she wishes – for example, to a best friend, a trusted servant, the poor of the local parish, or even to a home for disadvantaged boys and girls.

Why do people leave Wills?

People would decide to draft a Will in order to settle their affairs, to ensure that their family or dependants were provided for to make charitable bequests, and to remember friends.

Generally people did not make Wills early in life. There was much superstition among the medieval and early modern populace, and it may have been thought that to make a Will too early in life might tempt fate and accelerate death.

Some people sort out their estate and any marriage settlements years before they die, thus, making the necessity for a Will redundant. However, a Will may have been considered a prudent precaution if there was the possibility of the wife remarrying (especially if she was young) – in which case her possessions would have become the property of her new husband. Also, a Will may well have been judged necessary if it seemed likely there would be a dispute among family and relatives.

Wills for family history

The information contained in Wills is rich with genealogical value. Indeed, it has been estimated that every Will gives the names of about 10 people associated with the deceased – though wills vary from the very short, naming maybe just one beneficiary, to extensive documents, running to as much as a hundred pages, with many individuals mentioned.

Wills can give an insight into the lifestyle and status of a family. For example, a series of bequests of scholarly books would indicate an interest in learning. They may display deeply felt emotions: love, hate, exasperation, or protectiveness. References to non-family members – trusted servants, business associates, local worthies – can help to reveal aspects of family life and may provide clues to a wider story.

Also if one member of a family has left a written Will, it is likely that other members of the family, from earlier and later generations, may have left Wills, too.

Wills for local, social and economic history

Perhaps because of the difficulties in locating Wills according to trade or place, until recently they were not generally regarded as a prime source for local, social or economic history. But now many more wills are searchable online by place or occupation, and so the types of research for which they can be used have been greatly extended. Wills can, for example, be a helpful source in plotting the growth of a village or a trade, or the influence of landed families in an area or the spread of business contacts.

Identifying farmers, carpenters, butchers, preachers, clergymen or lawyers and examining their wills in conjunction with linked evidence, such as inventories and accounts, can allow the identification of social trends, or patterns of activity such as booms and slumps, across places and time. A number of important studies of the various social classes have drawn extensively on such records, produced both by academic institutions and individuals.

Charitable bequests – including those that actually create a charity – can offer an insight into the religious and philanthropic nature of society. In addition, a

particularly generous bequest may prompt further research, to try to ascertain the motive for the testator's generosity.

Look out for forthcoming related workshop activities in researching family records!

Records Management Education

- *The Unit is now taking registrations for Appraisal Workshops to be conducted on August 18 & 19; 21 &22 and 25 &26. The Objectives of the Workshop are to provide 'hands-on' practical experience using semi-current records from Government Departments and to teach the skills needed to manage backlogs of inactive records in offices and storerooms. Please telephone the Unit for further details.*

- *We will need to visit some inactive records stores in order to select records for 'hands-on' experience during the Workshop. In order to facilitate ease of access to the store rooms we are kindly requesting the cooperation of Heads of Departments and Records Managers to make keys available during that time.*

- *Demonstrations illustrating the use of scanners in managing information electronically are being conducted on request. Heads of Department may contact the Unit at extension 2564 to make appointments.*

Industry News

Right to know Law

Pennsylvania Gov. Edward Rendell signed an open records bill that will dramatically increase public access to state and local government records.

The new Right to know Law, which affects request for information made after January 1, 2009, makes it easier than it ever has been for Pennsylvania to find out about how their government operates and spend tax dollars. The law deems all state and local government records public unless specifically exempted, putting the onus on government to prove that they should be closed.

"Pennsylvania had one of the worst open-records laws because it allowed too many records to be classified, essentially, as closed, unless the person asking could prove that those documents should be public," Rendell said in a press release. "With a new law, it's now the state agency's burden to show why information should be protected."

Under the new law, written records request may be submitted in person, by email, fax, or any other electronic means as provided by the agency. Agencies must respond to requests within five business days, which is half the time required by the current law.

An agency may respond to a request by notifying the person who is seeking the information that the document is available through publicly accessible electronic means. If the requester cannot access the record electronically, he or she may submit a written request within 30 days of the agency's notification to have the record converted to paper.

The new law provides for 30 exemptions that will still allow agencies to withhold certain records, including:

- If releasing the records would likely result in physical harm or risk the personally security of an individual
- If releasing the records would compromise the safety or security of a building, resource, or public utility
- Certain personal or employment information
- Notes or working papers of public officials and agency employees created for their own personal use
- Certain information related to criminal investigations

Quote for Today

"The dilemma all guardians of documentary heritage are facing is to increase access while still ensuring its ultimate survival." Mairo Aleppo, UK National Archives

The Friends of the National Archives *will meet on 10th September, 4.30 PM, Conference Room # 10, Central Administration Building.*

Anglican Church Festival Queen Competition, 1940s

The winner was Beatrice Donovan

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