

Begin with a question

A printable worksheet for planning research when local records are incomplete. Keep your completed sheets private; this download sends no answers to the website.

A missing record is not proof that an event never happened. First establish which records were created, which survive, and what you actually searched.

1. What specific relationship or event am I trying to establish?

2. What dates and places are supported by sources?

3. Which jurisdiction held the records at that time?

Use the county guides as starting points, then check the repository catalog. This sample is a planning tool, not a complete county inventory or proof of ancestry.

Plan and record a search

Repeat this page for each source or collection. Record unsuccessful searches as carefully as successful ones.

Repository, collection, volume, page/image and stable link

Search date, names/variants, date range and filters used

Result: what does the record actually say?

Coverage gaps, unreadable pages or access limitations

Possible leads to check: land and tax records, chancery cases, church records, newspapers, neighboring jurisdictions and family papers. Availability varies by place and period.

Separate evidence from inference

Use a different sheet for each proposed relationship. Do not let a plausible story become a documented fact.

Claim being evaluated

Evidence supporting the claim (with citations)

Contradictions and alternative explanations

What remains unknown? What would change my conclusion?

Status: ☐ Question only ☐ Working hypothesis ☐ Needs further review

Marking a box does not establish proof. Explain your reasoning and preserve conflicting evidence.

A careful next step

Example below is entirely fictional. The names, dates and record descriptions are invented only to demonstrate the worksheet.

Question: Were Alex Example and Morgan Example siblings? Two fictional tax entries place them in the same locality in 1810.

What the entries support: people with those names appear in that locality. What they do not establish: a sibling relationship. Shared surnames and proximity alone are insufficient.

Next search: identify surviving deeds, estates or court cases that could state a relationship. Check ages, associates and alternative identities. If a search fails, record the collection and coverage instead of writing "no records exist."

If using AI: compare every transcription to the image, mark uncertain words, open every cited source, and keep living-person information out of public prompts. AI output is a research aid, not an independent source.

Public starting points

Kings of Virginia county guides

<https://kingsofvirginia.org/virginia-counties/>

Kings of Virginia burned-records guide

<https://kingsofvirginia.org/records-sources/burned-records-research/>

Library of Virginia

<https://www.lva.virginia.gov/>

Virginia Genealogical Society

<https://www.vgs.org/>

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