Genealogy Research in the District of Columbia

Native American History

The **Algonquin tribes** which lived in Maryland included the **Piscataway** and the **Nanjemoy**.

The Piscataway lived along the Potomac River from Broad Creek to Piscataway Creek to Pomonkey Creek, in what is now Prince Georges County, Maryland.

*"*Archaeologists believe that the ancestors of the Piscataway arrived in what is now southern Maryland between A.D. 900 and 1300.

Capt. John Smith, exploring the upper Chesapeake Bay in 1608, described the Piscataway as the largest and most powerful group among six or seven Algonquian-speaking peoples living in the Tidewater sections of southern Maryland.

Known collectively as the **Conoy**, the Piscataway included the **Nacotchtank, Pamunkeys, Nanjemoys, Potapacos, Yoacomacos** and perhaps also the **Tauxenents**. All were subservient to the Piscataway ruler, the Tayac.

The Conoy lived, hunted, farmed and fished along the Maryland side of the Potomac River as far north as the Great Falls near Washington. Colonial documents record that a group of Iroquoian-speaking **Susquehannock Indians** entered Conoy territory in the 17th century and built a stronghold near Nanjemoy. They fought with both the European colonists and the Piscataway*."*

Above quote is courtesy of "*INDIAN REMAINS - Blood of the Piscataway Still Runs Deep* ", printed in the Baltimore Sun May 04, 1992.

The Nanjemoy lived from Mallows Bay on the Potomac River to Nanjemoy Creek in Charles County, Maryland.

Two **independent Algonquin chiefdoms** on the lower Potomac River's northern shore included the **Chaptico** (also called **Cecomocomoco**) and the **Yoacomaco**.

The Chaptico lived along Cuckhold Creek, the Wicomico River, and Brenton Bay. After 1707, they seem to have blended into the rest of the population of the area and ceased to exist as a separate tribe or culture. The Yoacomaco lived near the St. Mary's River in 1634.

Precolonial Period Records of Native Americans: Historically, there are few "official" records of individual Indians who resided in Maryland. The records that were kept and still exist consist mostly of general histories of tribes or groups, personal records kept by early settlers in the area, and records of the efforts of churches or individual missionaries to "Christianize" the Indians. The records that still exist are scattered in many archives and other records depositories and no good, single inventory of those records is known.

Colonial Period Records of Native Americans: Historical documents listing individual Indians are very scarce for the colonial time period. Some of the records for this time period may be found in historical societies and archives, libraries, the historical societies and archives of religious denominations, and in private collections of colonial records.

European Settlement and Interaction with the Tribes

"According to the documented arrival of John Smith and first contact with the English colonizers in the 17th century, the indigenous tribes were intricately mapped throughout the Chesapeake Bay area. Within 40 years the existing indigenous townships and Powhatan cultures were crippled by the introduction of new diseases and war. The remaining numbers of tribes were forcibly removed from their homelands, pushed further to join larger tribes like those in the northern Algonquian speaking nations.

Capt. John Smith's map (1612) showing Nacotchtank details (Library of Congress)

Remaining tribes were sold into slavery in the Caribbean Islands. According to officials at the National Museum of the American Indian, there are no living Nacotchtank lineage left. Their numbers were decimated, and survivors were adopted into the Piscataway people, losing their original identity and descendancy."
Above quote courtesy of the ALA: http://www.ala.org/aboutala/indigenous-tribes-washington-dc

1663: The first land grants were made to English settlers in Charles County, Maryland.
1751: Scottish immigrants founded Georgetown, MD.
1790: Act of 16 July 1790 organized the territory of the District of Columbia to be the seat of U.S. federal government.
1788-1791: Maryland ceded parts of Montgomery County (including Georgetown) and Prince George County to the District, and Virginia ceded part of Fairfax County (including Alexandria). The Maryland counties continued to keep official records until about 1801. The original Fairfax County, VA, area was later given back to the state of Virginia, and all Alexandria records are housed in VA.
1800: Congress, the President, and a staff of about 140 people moved from Philadelphia to Washington. Until 1800, the federal government had operated in Philadelphia. In the interim before the government relocated, residents of the District used record-keeping services in Fairfax County, Virginia, and Montgomery County, Maryland, until local government offices were established. By 1800, the District's population was about 14,000.

1801: Two counties were established in the District: Washington County, east of the Potomac, and Alexandria County, on the west side of the river.
1802: The City of Washington was incorporated. Georgetown wills and deeds continued to be registered in Montgomery County, Maryland until the late nineteenth century.
1814: During the War of 1812, the British captured Washington and burned most of the public buildings and records.
1820: By 1820, the District's population had grown to about 33,000 as more government jobs were made available and retail businesses grew to accommodate the populace. Those moving into the area came mainly from surrounding states, but some merchants arrived from Europe. African Americans were always a major element of the District's population. Of the city's black population in 1800, those who were enslaved outnumbered those who were free by four to one. Sales of slaves by Virginia and Maryland planters thrived in Washington, D.C. However, many District slave owners manumitted their slaves in the 1800's, due partially to public outcry against the slave trade. By 1860 the number of free blacks actually exceeded the number of slaves by three to one.

- **1846:** The area of Fairfax County, VA that was originally ceded to the U.S. was given back to Virginia.
- **1861-1865:** Although defended by federal troops during the Civil War, Washington was several times threatened by Confederates. The civilian population of Washington more than doubled during the 1860s.
- **1871:** Congress changed the city's status to that of a Federal Territory.
- **1878:** The present-day form of government began.

Migration Routes

Chesapeake and Ohio Canal Cumberland Road Fall Line Road (or Southern Road) King's Highway National Road Potomac River Atlantic Coast Ports

The Atlas of Historical County Boundaries – this interactive map outlines and explains the changing historical boundaries, names, and organization of every county from colonial times through December 31, 2000 - http://publications.newberry.org/ahcbp/index.html

Major Genealogical/Historical Archives and Repositories

Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR)
District of Columbia Public Library
Historical Society of Washington, D.C
Jewish Genealogy Society of Greater Washington, Inc.
Library of Congress
National Archives and Records Administration
New York Public Library
United States Capitol Historical Society

District of Columbia Vital Records

Government birth and death records were not recorded until 1801, when Washington County and Alexandria County were created.
The counties recorded only a few births and deaths in the District of Columbia between 1801 and 1874.

Birth, Marriage, and Death Indexes - Gallaudet University Library Deaf Collections and Archives

- 19 indexes of Birth, Marriage, and Death records early 1800's to mid-1900's

These records are of deaf students and faculty members listed in the archives of the Pennsylvania School for the Deaf and of the Columbia Institution for the Deaf and Dumb (now Gallaudet University).

Birth Records

For evidence of births before 1801, search:

- Church records – births, marriages, deaths
- Family Bibles
- Census records of Fairfax County, VA or Montgomery County, MD
- Newspaper articles/obituaries
- Military Records of Fairfax County, VA or Montgomery County, MD
- Death Records of Fairfax County, VA or Montgomery County, MD
- Cemetery Records

Births dated 1801 to 1874:

Ancestry.com and FamilySearch.org have a database of some church birth records and christenings in the District between 1830 and 1955.

Birth Records between 1874 and the Present

On 1 August 1874, the District of Columbia began requiring civil records of all births.
The Family History Library (FHL) in Salt Lake City has microfilm copies of birth records from 1874– 1897.

Obtain a civil Birth Record dated 1874 till 100 years ago for a fee from the Department of Human Services, Vital Records Division.
Anyone who can prove a relationship to a person of record can obtain a copy of that person's birth record for research purposes. The Health Department will do a 3-year search of their indexes if you don't know the exact date of birth.

Obtain a Birth Record less than 100 Years Old
One of the following can obtain a record:

- The person on the certificate
- The parents, wife, husband or child of person on the certificate
- Anyone who has legal interest in the certificate

District of Columbia Marriage Records

Records of Marriages before 1811
Marriage records of people who lived in areas of MD and VA that later became the District of Columbia may be found in Montgomery County, MD or Fairfax County, VA.

Evidence of marriages prior to 1811 in other records:

- Church records – births, marriages, deaths
- Family Bibles
- Censuses – Montgomery County, MD; Fairfax County, VA; District of Columbia beginning 1810
- Military records – MD and VA counties
- Newspaper marriage announcements/obituaries
- Cemetery records

Marriages from 1811 to the present
The District of Columbia began requiring civil records of marriages in December 1811.

Online Databases
FamilySearch.org - some marriages recorded between 1811 and 1950.
Ancestry.com - some marriages recorded between 1830 and 1921.
Microfilms
Family History Library in Salt Lake City, UT microfilms:

- District of Columbia marriage index 1811–1986
- Some Alexandria marriages 1811 to 1950
- Marriages in the District of Columbia 1811–54, 1870–1921, and 1907–50

Obtain a copy of a civil Marriage Record dated 1811 to the present from the **Clerk of the Superior Court** of the District of Columbia, **Marriage Bureau & Special Services**.
Marriage records over 50 years old are public records; no approval is needed to obtain a copy.

District of Columbia Death Records

Online Databases
FamilySearch.org and *Ancestry.com* - some deaths recorded between 1840 and 1964.

County Records:

- Fairfax County, VA began recording deaths in 1854
- Montgomery County, MD recorded a few deaths beginning in 1865

Civil death records for the District of Columbia date from 1 August 1874.
Obtain a copy of a death record for a fee from the **Department of Human Services;** Vital Records Division. Applicants who prove a relationship to the person of record may obtain a copy for research purposes. The records must be more than 50 years old.

District of Columbia Genealogy Research Websites

Note: Check online for the *GenWeb* and *Genealogy Trails* of the county in which your ancestor lived.

DC GenWeb Project – research, resources, and records - http://www.theusgenweb.org/dcgenweb/
DigDC - maps, photos, postcards, pamphlets, historical newspapers - https://digdc.dclibrary.org/
District of Columbia History and Genealogy – links to websites with genealogical and historical information - http://www.districtofcolumbiagenealogy.com/
Washington D.C. Genealogy Trails - http://genealogytrails.com/washdc/#.WcApEsZryUk

District of Columbia African American Research

AfricaMap – track the slave trade with historical overlays and geographical data - http://worldmap.harvard.edu/africamap/
AfriGeneas – slave records, death and marriage records, censuses, surnames – chat or send messages to other researchers - http://afrigeneas.com/
Digital Library on American Slavery – search database of slave petitions, runaway slave advertisements, bills of sale, transatlantic slave trade database; this compilation of various online collections started with a focus on records in North Carolina but the information includes people in all 15 slave states and Washington D.C.; more records are currently being digitized - http://library.uncg.edu/slavery/
Freedmen's Bureau Online, District of Columbia – District marriages - http://www.freedmensbureau.com/washingtondc/dcmarriages1.htm
International African American Museum - African American funeral programs, obituaries, marriage records, photos, historical documents and family histories – military records of the U.S. Colored Troops are currently being digitized - https://cfh.iaamuseum.org/records/
Last Seen: Finding Family After Slavery - search thousands of "Information Wanted" advertisements taken out by former slaves in all states searching for family members lost by sale, flight, or enlistment – the collection currently includes newspapers from 1853 to 1911 - http://www.informationwanted.org/
Slave Voyages - the *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database* documents vessels along the Atlantic slave routes from 1514 to 1866; *Intra-American Slave Trade Database* documents vessels traveling between the Atlantic and Pacific ports ranging from the United States to Brazil; the *African Names Database* gives names, ages, possible origins of slaves liberated from captured slave ships between 1808 and 1862 - https://www.slavevoyages.org/

District of Columbia Cemetery Research Websites

Congressional Cemetery – search listing of burials - http://www.congressionalcemetery.org/
The Oak Hill Cemetery - search listing of burials through 2007, including tombstone inscriptions, lot and section maps - https://www.oakhillcemeterydc.org/

District of Columbia Military Research

Grand Army of the Republic Records Project – developing database - histories of posts, reports of officers and members if available, search by state - http://suvcw.org/garrecords/

Information on these pages is compiled from information in:

- *FamilySearch.org* Wiki - *Ancestry.com* Learning Center/Wiki
- Family Tree Magazine
- *The Weekly Genealogist, NEHGS; Dick Eastman Genealogy Newsletter; Genealogy Gems from the Allen County Public Library*