

# Separating Multiple Generations of Virginians with the Same Name

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Attempting to trace an ancestor back to their Virginia roots often results in discovering an original settler whose descendants named their children after him. Several generations of the family could have individuals of the same name residing in one geographical location. Identifying unique individuals requires placing them in the context of their families. Discovering relationships through those records most likely to provide identifying information such as probate, tax, and land records is key.

Employing practical techniques for tracking the records and the people they name will allow the researcher to make important connections.

## **Challenges of Researching Same-named Individuals in Virginia**

Researching same-name individuals in Virginia brings with it several challenges.

Because colonists began arriving very early, with the first group arriving in Jamestown, many people trace an ancestral line back to an early Virginian. These early Virginians often followed the Anglican naming tradition from England of naming first-born sons after the paternal grandfather and the second-born son after his father.<sup>1</sup> Although not all families will follow this exact pattern, with enough males passing down the original settler's surname and naming at least one of their sons with his given name, eventually, there will be a plethora of men of the same name.

As the tidewater area filled with Virginians, subsequent generations of early settlers began moving west and establishing the family's presence on large tracts of land. Several generations could settle in the same county or neighboring counties and be named in various records.

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<sup>1</sup> "Virginia Naming Ways: Anglican Onomastics," *Albion's Seed*, p. 50, ([erenow.net/common/fourbritishfolkwaysinamerica1989/50.php](http://erenow.net/common/fourbritishfolkwaysinamerica1989/50.php) : accessed 21 February 2023); from David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed; Four British Folkways in America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

Another challenge in the research is record loss. Record loss is a significant issue in Virginia due to the Civil War's destruction. What records do remain must be carefully analyzed and correlated to reconstruct families and separate men of the same name.

### **Virginia Probate, Land, and Tax Probate Records**

Probate records may provide many identifying elements for separating same-named individuals: family relationships, property descriptions, and witnesses. All probate-related documents, including the will, inventory, estate sales, and administrative documents, should be sought. Each should be transcribed and combed for every clue to identity.

The land was an essential commodity for an ancestor, and surviving land records could be the original colonial land grant or subsequent deeds showing the property transfer. For men of the same name, spouses and children are important unique identifiers. A wife would need to sign away her dowry in the case of a land sale, and land could be deeded to children. Correlating the purchase and sale of land with land and tax records can paint a clear picture of an individual's dealings in the community and serve to identify them uniquely.

Tax records provide a year-to-year assessment of the community and many details to help separate people of the same name. Additionally, tax records can give an idea of an ancestor's age by when they appear by name in the tax lists. In colonial Virginia, the term "tithable" referred to a person who paid a tax imposed by the General Assembly. All free white males over sixteen, enslaved people, and indigenous persons were considered tithables, with the head of household paying the tax on their enslaved people and servants.<sup>2</sup>

In 1782 the Commonwealth of Virginia enacted a new law requiring each county to collect personal property taxes. The specific requirements changed between 1782 and 1865, but generally, the tax commissioner for each district listed the names of the person paying the tax in alphabetical order. A man's neighborhood could be determined by the district where he was repeatedly taxed. These lists would include the number of white male tithables between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one, the number of enslaved people above and below the age of sixteen, different types of animals, carriage wheels,

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<sup>2</sup> "Colonial Tithables," *Library of Virginia* ([lva-virginia.libguides.com/tithables](https://lva-virginia.libguides.com/tithables) : accessed 23 February 2023).

ordinary licenses, and even billiard tables. Free blacks were also listed by name with the designation of free or FN (free negro).<sup>3</sup>

## **Technology Tools for Tracking Same-Named Individuals**

With the complexity of research involved in researching many people, several tools are available to the genealogist.

### **Airtable**

Airtable ([airtable.com](https://airtable.com)) is a web-based spreadsheet and database program that allows for creating links between tables, viewing data flexibly by sorting and grouping data, and creating unique field types. In Airtable, a spreadsheet is called a base, and pages/sheets within the base are called tables. Within each table, rows are called records, and columns are called fields.

One of Airtable's most powerful tools for visualizing the research is the ability to group and sort the rows in a table by a particular field, such as the repository, person, location, or date. A linked field for tracking the FANs (Friends, Associates, & Neighbors) is beneficial when assigning unique identities to people of the same name.

Another helpful feature of Airtable is the ability to create custom field types like long text, numbers, dates, multiple select, checkboxes, and attachments. You can customize your Airtable base to fit your research needs.

Nicole Dyer has created several Airtable templates for use in genealogy. The latest is titled RLP with DNA 2023 Log. This template included several tables for DNA analysis, which can be used if desired. The main tables for a research project are the timeline, research log, people, and FANS.

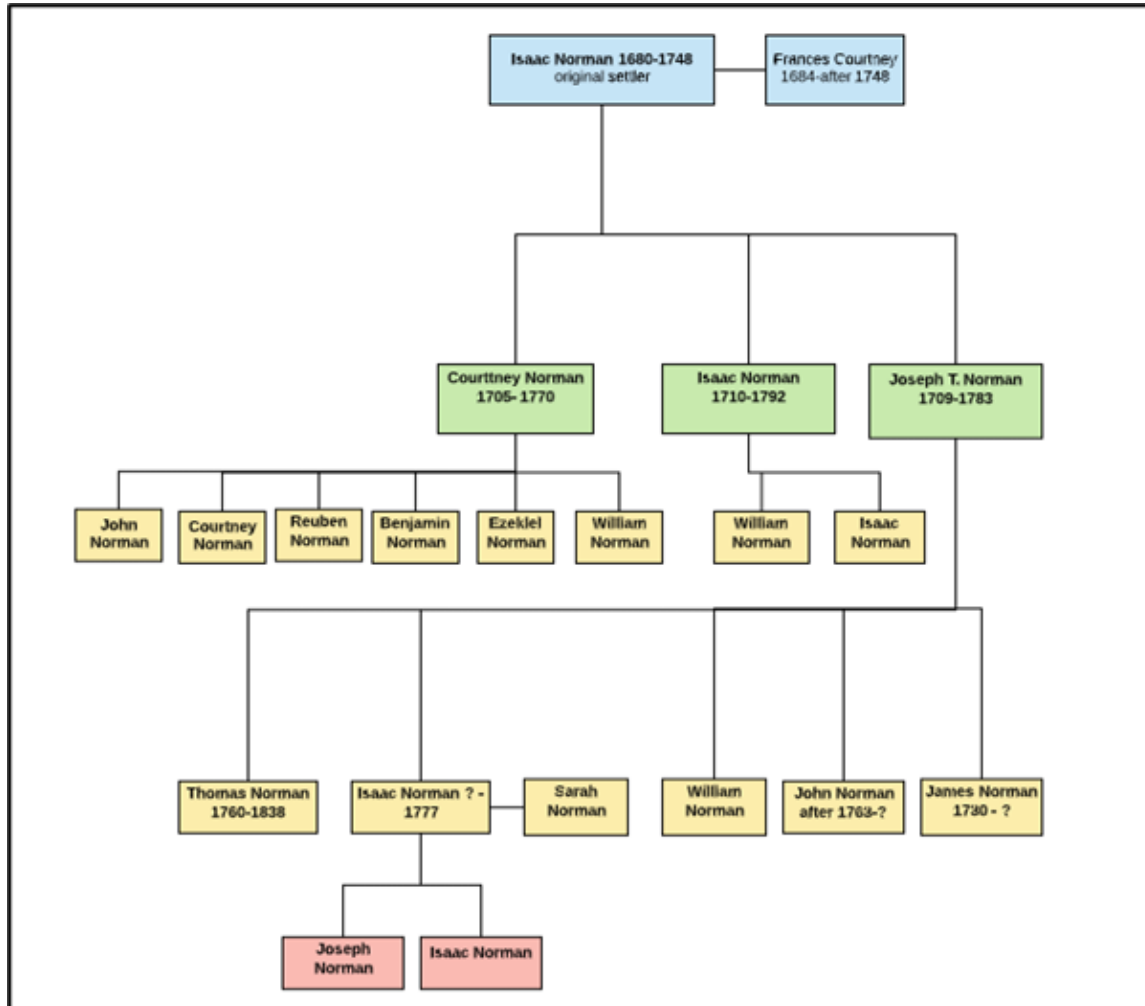
The first step of any project is to analyze the known information. Entering the records into a timeline will help to evaluate their validity. Each same-named person should have something unique added to their name when entered in the "Person" field in Airtable. For example, Isaac Norman b. 1680, Isaac Norman Gen. 2, or Isaac Norman m. to Elizabeth.

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<sup>3</sup> "Using Personal Property Tax Records in the Archives at the Library of Virginia," Research Notes Number 3, Library of Virginia ([lva.virginia.gov/public/guides/rn3\\_persprop.pdf](https://lva.virginia.gov/public/guides/rn3_persprop.pdf) : accessed 23 February 2023).

After assessing the known information, a locality study can point to additional records to search, and then a research plan can focus the research on the specific objective. When following the research plan, enter the searches in the research log table of the Airtable base. Use the same naming convention as in the timeline, and if the unique identity is unknown for the person, additional research may discover more clues. Adjust the names as identities become clear.

### Diagramming Tools



When dealing with multi-generational research problems, creating a diagram of the family can help visualize the relationships described in the records. Tools for diagramming range from simple to complex. A pencil and paper, a whiteboard, or sticky notes on a wall can be an initial way to see the possibilities. Still, a more permanent method is desirable as the research becomes more complicated.

Diagramming software allows using shapes, lines, and text to create specialized charts that can easily be edited as new information comes to light. Lucidchart is a paid program with many excellent functions. ([lucidchart.com](http://lucidchart.com)). Diagrams.net is similar to Lucidchart and is free. ([diagrams.net/](http://diagrams.net/)).

Before beginning the diagram, sort the records from earliest to latest in the timeline and research log. Look for the earliest settler and place him at the top of the diagram. Often he came into the area with brothers or grown sons, which can also be noted.

Hypothesized relationships can be shown with dotted lines, and notes can be added to the diagram as reminders of the logic used to create the diagram.

Begin with any available probate records, which most likely state familial relationships. Then move to land, tax, census, and other sources. After studying the records, attempt to place individuals in their correct place in the diagram. Enter their name in a box with birth or death information or estimates. Also, list the date and description of the record that applies to this specific person. At a glance, the diagram will be a reminder of what is known. The beauty of a digital diagram is the ability to move sections if new information changes the hypothesis.

### Genealogy Software

When exploring individuals of the same name, adding them to an online tree or tree through a software program like Family Tree Maker or RootsMagic is beneficial. As the family groups are filled out based on source documents, connections may become apparent. Until relationships are known, individuals can be added to the software program as unlinked people. Then they can be connected to parents or children as research reveals the relationships. If adding to an Ancestry online tree, add the person first as a child to a known ancestor, then unlink them from the relationship. This will create a floating branch within the main research tree that can eventually be connected.

## Additional Resources

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