

Ideas in Action: Virginians Petition Their Government, 1776– 1786:

Library of Virginia Proposal to the Virginia American Revolution 250 Commission

The Virginia American Revolution 250 Commission has identified “A Revolution of Ideas” as the overarching theme for the commemorative programs and events that will occur over the next several years in observance of the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution. As one of its contributions to the 250th anniversary, the Library of Virginia proposes to undertake a dynamic web-based project tied directly to this theme that will encourage active public engagement with one of the Commonwealth’s most important Revolutionary-era documentary collections and prompt fresh approaches to studying, teaching, and understanding Virginia in the formative years following independence. “Ideas in Action: Virginians Petition Their Government, 1776 – 1786” will augment the Commission’s work during the 250th anniversary, but as a web-based project, it will be accessible for years after the Commission has concluded and serve as an ongoing legacy of the 250th commemoration.

Overview

“Ideas in Action: Virginians Petition Their Government, 1776 – 1786” is envisioned as a participatory approach to introducing and engaging today’s Virginians with the ideals contained in the more than 2,000 petitions that Revolutionary-era Virginians submitted to their elected representatives in the General Assembly during in this 10-year span. Individuals of all backgrounds and walks of life, residing in every corner of the Commonwealth, exercised their longstanding right to petition their government in these years, expressing their views on the future based on their understanding of the ideals and principles that sparked the Revolution. These petitions demonstrate that Virginians believed that government existed to protect their rights and that it was accountable to the people. They also reveal that Virginians did not always agree on the meaning of “all men are created equal” or on the best way to secure “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

While Virginians sought assistance from their new government on a wide range of concerns, three issues stand out among the more than 2,000 requests:

- The largest number of petitions were for war claims and pensions. These records demonstrate the support that common citizens rendered to the cause of revolution and the personal cost to those who served or those left behind. Compensation for wartime service and support opened the way for property ownership for non-elites and the rapid expansion of Virginia westward, creating the very class of independent freeholders that Jefferson envisioned as the backbone of American democracy.
- Petitions regarding manumissions and chattel slavery demonstrate the Revolutionary generation’s struggle with issues of individual liberty and citizenship. Concepts of universal freedom, enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, inspired Virginia’s 1782 manumission law, but citizens petitioned for and against this statute. Many Black Virginians were inspired by the promise of the Revolution to appeal for and sometimes achieve their freedom.
- More than 300 petitions concern religious freedom and church issues. In no other state did the American Revolution bring forth such a radical rethinking of the relationship between church and state. One of the most notable petitions, submitted on October 16, 1776, was signed by as many as 10,000 Virginians who identified themselves as dissenters who sought “Equal Liberty! That invaluable Blessing” to practice their religious beliefs without being subjected to taxation to support the Anglican Church. Virginia’s Statute for

Religious Freedom, passed by the General Assembly in 1786, was the culmination of more than a decade of petitioning on the part of Virginians from diverse faith traditions and served as the inspiration for the First Amendment to the United States Constitution guaranteeing religious liberty to all Americans.

The petitions submitted between 1776 and 1786 serve as an important register of popular opinion on matters both public and private. They are an invaluable tool for historical and genealogical research, often containing hundreds of signatures and accompanied by supporting documents such as maps, wills, naturalizations, deeds, resolutions, affidavits, and judgements. Academic researchers are familiar with this collection, but the petitions deserve a much wider audience as they offer a unique window into late-eighteenth century Virginia and the Revolutionary generation.

Project Details

“Ideas in Action” crowd engagement portal

Several years ago, the Library digitized the microfilm of the entire legislative petition collection from 1776 through 1865. The petitions are available to researchers through the Library’s catalog (<https://lva-virginia.libguides.com/petitions>), where they can be searched by keyword, topic, and locality. While this traditional delivery method provides access to individual petitions and distinct groupings of petitions, the Library proposes a new way of presenting the Revolutionary-era petitions that will allow for more collaborative and engaging exploration of the materials, while also creating a lasting online resource for educators and students.

In 2013 the Library launched “Making History,” a project that engages the public directly with historical documents through indexing, transcription and text correction. Thousands of people, from Virginia and across the world, have contributed through the years to the Library’s “Making History” project. These experiences have deepened their understanding of our shared history, given them insights into the humanity that lives in our documents, and enabled them to make connections between the past and their present. Among the professional archival community and state archives across the country, “Making History” has become an admired and replicated model for other institutions seeking to engage the public deeply in their collections.

Leveraging this expertise and solid grounding in participatory public history, the Library will invite direct engagement with the ideas, interests, and actions of Virginians between 1776-1786. Utilizing the petitions and a number of related records from other Library of Virginia collections (among them Virginia Untold, the Chancery Records Index, Revolutionary War pension applications, the *Virginia Gazette*, and Church Records), the “Ideas in Action” project portal will provide an opportunity for present-day Virginians to transcribe the digitized petitions and related materials. It will offer a variety of pathways for members of the public, students, and researchers to explore these documents and enhance their understanding of the lived experiences of men and women during the Revolutionary era.

Transcription and indexing output has immense value. In addition to encouraging individuals to engage deeply with historical documents, transcription increases access through full text searchability and improved readability. Also, output as text and indexing supports more insightful explorations through mapping, visualizations, and text analysis. The Library will make all completed transcriptions freely available for download and re-use and will also create tutorials for users who may want to explore the data in new ways. The Library will incorporate this output into its materials on the Virginia Open Data Portal, where users can create data visualizations and mapping graphics, as well as combine datasets to create new analyses.

The portal will be accessible to a general audience, as well as high school and college students, historians of the American Revolution, and digital humanities practitioners. The work the Library does on this project will be detailed in video tutorials and articles on The UncommonWealth, the Library’s blog.

“Ideas in Action” educational website

In addition, the content generated in this project will form the basis of a separate robust educational website that will be accessible not only to students and teachers, but to family and local historians and anyone interested in understanding the Revolutionary era and its relationship to Virginia in the twenty-first century. The Library will partner with the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media (RRCHNM) at George Mason University to develop the educational website.

Over the past twenty years RRCHNM has built more than sixty successful online projects that provide resources for teachers and make online humanities collections widely and conveniently accessible. RRCHNM understands how to annotate and frame humanities content to enable students to understand primary sources in their historical context. They also know how to align the content with the state’s Standards of Learning for history and civics. RRCHNM proposes to create several different educational modules for the site– some focused on different grade levels and some on the different geographical regions of the state. The petitions housed on the educational website would be linked to other original resources provided by the Library. Additional resources on the site would include activities detailing how students petition in the present day through contacting their state and local governments on issues that affect their lives.

Over time, we would like to add other features to the website. A database with the names of all the signers of the petitions, for example, could be added to allow basic biographical information about each signer to be uploaded. Members of the Friends of the Virginia State Archives, the Virginia Genealogical Society, and other groups have expressed interest in assisting with this work and in serving as institutional partners for the project.

Public Programming

The Library plans to host a number of in-person public programs that will explore the key issues highlighted in the petitions, especially those relating to civic duty, property rights, emancipation, and religious freedom. Transcription events in various localities will focus on regional or topical materials of interest, which will help make the words and actions of Revolutionary leaders more meaningful to Virginians today. The Library anticipates these programs taking place in Richmond but also across the state in partnership with local VA250 committees. The Library’s annual summer institute for teachers in 2026 (held in four different regions of the state) will utilize the new educational website, preparing teachers to make maximum use of the content in their classrooms.

RRCHNM will also assist with outreach, particularly to Virginia schools. RRCHNM has close ties to the statewide network of social studies curriculum coordinators. These administrators will make certain that Virginia’s teachers are alerted once the project is ready for classroom use. In addition, colleagues at George Mason University’s Center for Mason Legacies and in the Department of History have already begun plans to use these collections and the project’s crowdsourcing and data analysis opportunities in coursework and student research projects during the 250th timeframe. These historians and humanities scholars are excited to participate in the Library’s programming and transcription events in local communities to share their knowledge and understanding of this important era in Virginia’s history.

Outcomes/Deliverables

- Robust crowdsourcing and outreach programming that will work directly with Virginia localities via local 250th committees, as well as public libraries, schools, and other interested groups.

- Permanent online portal that provides enhanced access to digital content (images, text, and data) of the more than 2,000 revolutionary-era petitions submitted to the General Assembly by Virginians in the first decade of independence, as well as other supporting collection materials.
- Ideas in Action educational website that will allow students, teachers, researchers, and the public to explore the content to better understand Virginia during the first decade of independence as well as further new discoveries and insight.

Timeline and Budget

The Library has a great deal of experience in digitizing and securely storing historical collections but will need additional staff support while building the portal to ensure that this work stays on schedule. A project specialist will oversee management and selection of collection materials, manage crowdsourcing planning and programming, write promotional articles, “wrangle the data,” and collaborate with colleagues at RRCHNM to ensure Library content is delivered accurately and on-time. Existing Library technical and digital collections staff will support the specialist to ensure outcomes are achieved.

Developing and implementing the Ideas in Action project and associated programming will be a three-year effort, following this anticipated timeline:

Year One: Statewide programming and outreach, leveraging the network of local 250th anniversary committees that will include crowdsourcing of petitions, building of datasets and related data analyses tools on project website. Toward the end of the year, work begins designing educational website.

Year Two: Continued statewide programming with transcription of petitions and the addition of supporting collection materials focused on various localities and regions. Continued building of site. Launch of site by year’s end.

Year Three: Statewide programming and outreach, as well as continued engagement activities as requested. Prepare Virginia’s teachers to use the project sites and materials in classrooms through the Library’s summer institute for teachers and coordination with the Department of Education and the state’s social studies curriculum coordinators.

Project Budget (for three years)

Project Manager (salary and benefits) - \$92,000/yr for 3 yrs)	\$276,000
Website development and implementation	\$250,000
Digitization of other collections to support project	\$30,000
Programming & Travel	\$50,000
TOTAL:	\$606,000

Addendum: Supporting Documentation

Links:

[LVA Digital Collections](https://lva.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/collec/onDiscovery?vid=01LVA_INST:01LVA)

(https://lva.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/collec/onDiscovery?vid=01LVA_INST:01LVA)

[Making History](https://www.virginiamemory.com/makinghistory/) (<https://www.virginiamemory.com/makinghistory/>)

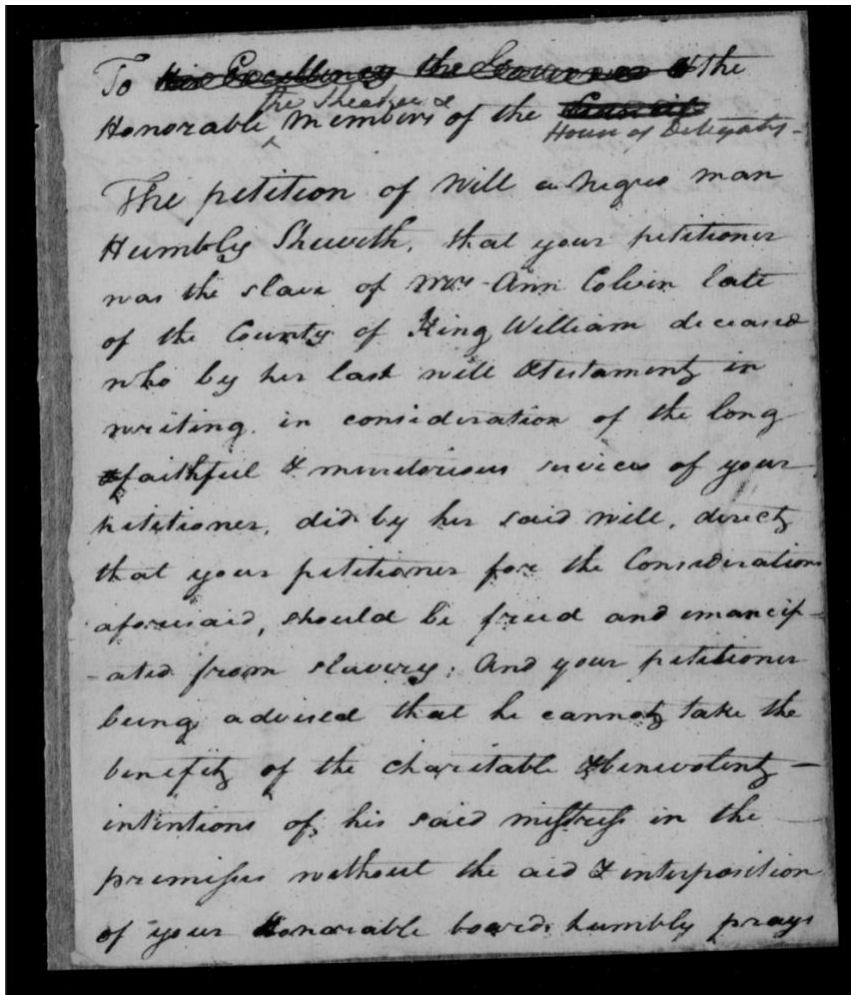
[LVA on Virginia Open Data Portal](https://data.virginia.gov/browse?tags=library+of+virginia+%28lva%29) (<https://data.virginia.gov/browse?tags=library+of+virginia+%28lva%29>)

[Legislative Petitions example](https://data.virginia.gov/dataset/Legislative-Petitions-example-for-the-Virginia-250/ppvf-fbf4) (<https://data.virginia.gov/dataset/Legislative-Petitions-example-for-the-Virginia-250/ppvf-fbf4>)

[Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media](https://rrchnm.org/) (<https://rrchnm.org/>)

Examples of Legislative Petitions and transcriptions

Petition of Will, 1779-11-04 (King William County)





Bennet, Anne: Petition
1780-12-09
091_289_115_001.jpg

To the Honourable the Speaker and other members of the house of delegates of the Commonwealth of Virginia. The Petition of Anne Bennet, an infant under the age of twenty one years, by William [Alvey?], her guardian, humbly, Sheweth that Ann Colvin, deceived a woman in low circumstance and possessed only of one slave, made her last will & testament in writing on the twenty fifth day of Nov'r in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and seventy six, wherein she bequithed the same slave, who is named Will, and a house, to Elizabeth Bennet your Petitioner's Cousin, and directed that the remaining part of Her Estate should be sold and divided in certain proportions Between the said Elizabeth, and your Petitioner, (who were her Grand Children & her only descendants) making them at the Same time Reciprocally Heiresses to one another, soon after, Elizabeth Bennet Died, without Issue, and on the twenty second day of July In the year of our Lord, one thousand, seven hundred, and seventy Nine, the said Ann made a codicil to her said will, whereby The did will, and ordain, the said slave Will, to be free, and not Subject to Slavery in Consideration of the long and faithful Service done to her, by him, and moreover, bequeathed the Said House. & a [Con?] yearling to the said Will, before the making of this Codicil no meritorious service was proved before the Governor And Council, to have Been done by the said slave and consequently No Judgement was given by them, that he deserved his freedom And no licence issued for the purpose of setting him free nor indeed Has any of those things happen'd untill this day. these things However your Petitioner has understood are required by Law Before any Slave can be set free; and that she has the greatest Veneration for the memory of her deceased grandmother, yet She Cannot help suggesting to this Honourable house, that she Believes that the codicil to her grandmother will was made On account of the fear which she Entertained of receiving some Personal Injury from him, rather than on account of any grati=
=tude for his past Services, as an Evidence that this Suggestion is well founded, your Petitioner believes that she can prove, that the slave Will, after having often threatened, and once attempted to take away his own life. In order to revenge himself of his Former Master for giving him a Slight Correction, has made an attempt upon the life of your Petitioner's Grandmother who was to him a most indulgent mistress, and constantly told her that he would never serve any person to whom she should Leave him. From hence it will appear that instead of meri=

Matters about which people petitioned:

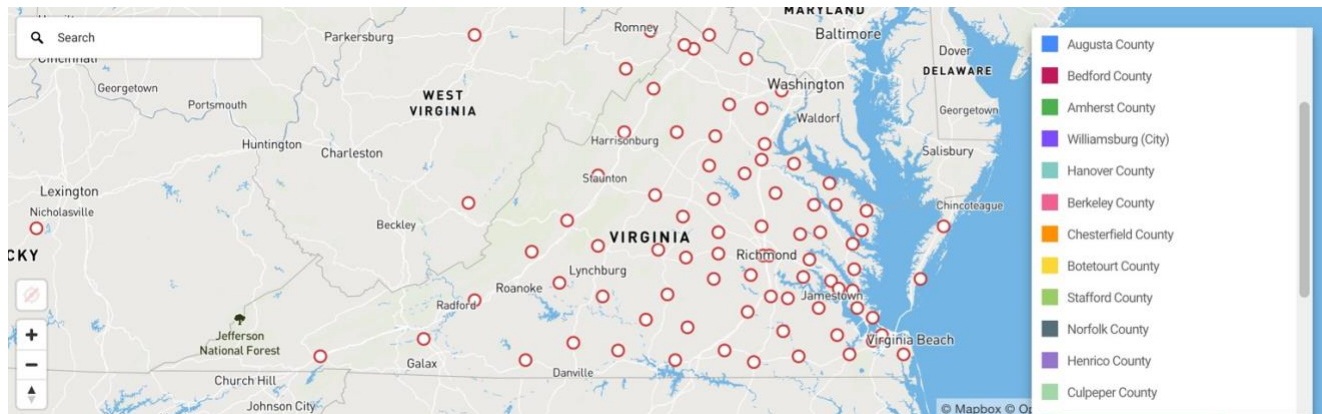
- Agriculture/Livestock/Farming
- Appropriations/Salary Increases
- Bridges
- Canals
- Charters/Incorporations
- Churches/Religious Issues
- Citizenship/Naturalizations
- Commerce
- Constitutional Conventions
- Courts/Judicial System
- Division of County/New County
- Divorce
- Elections
- Enslaved persons
- Ferries/Packets
- Fishing/Oyster Industry
- Flour Inspection/Industry
- Free Blacks
- Indians
- Land/Real Estate
- Manufacturers/Manufacturing Companies
- Militia/Public Guard
- Mining/Mining Companies
- Miscellaneous
- Navigation/Navigation Companies
- Organizations
- Paper Money
- Pardons/Release from Fines, Judgments
- Private Relief/Compensation
- Prohibition/Temperance
- Revenue/Taxation
- Roads/Turnpike Companies
- Schools/Universities
- Slavery
- Tobacco Inspection/Industry
- Towns
- War Claims/Pensions
- Wills and Administrations

Mapping Opportunities:

View on [Virginia Open Data portal](https://data.virginia.gov/dataset/Legislative-Petitions-draft-map-visualization-for-/tbdx-rt29):

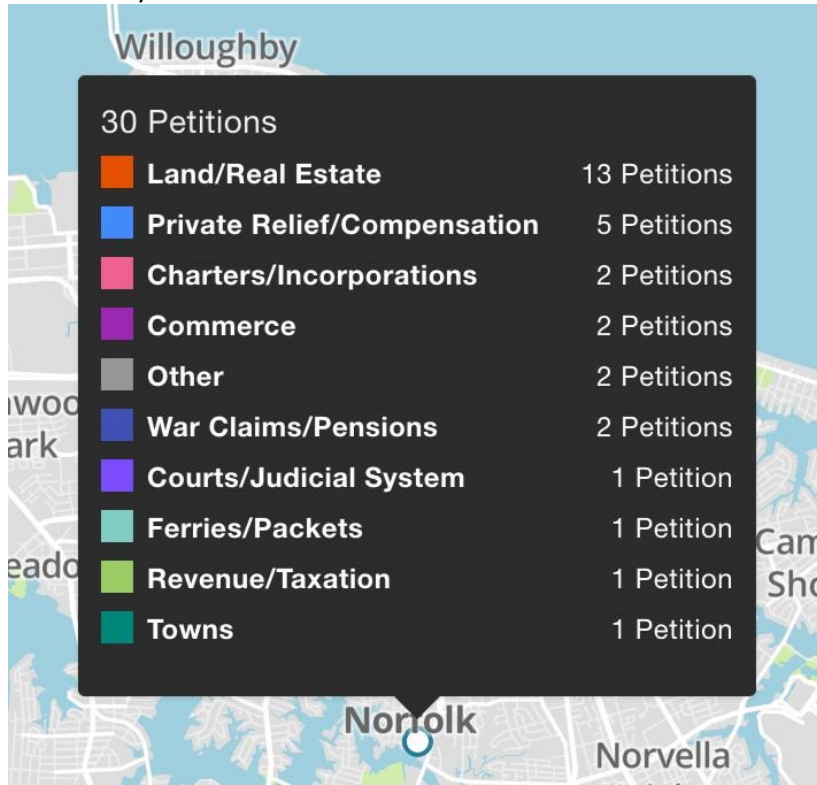
(<https://data.virginia.gov/dataset/Legislative-Petitions-draft-map-visualization-for-/tbdx-rt29>)

Geographic display of petitions.

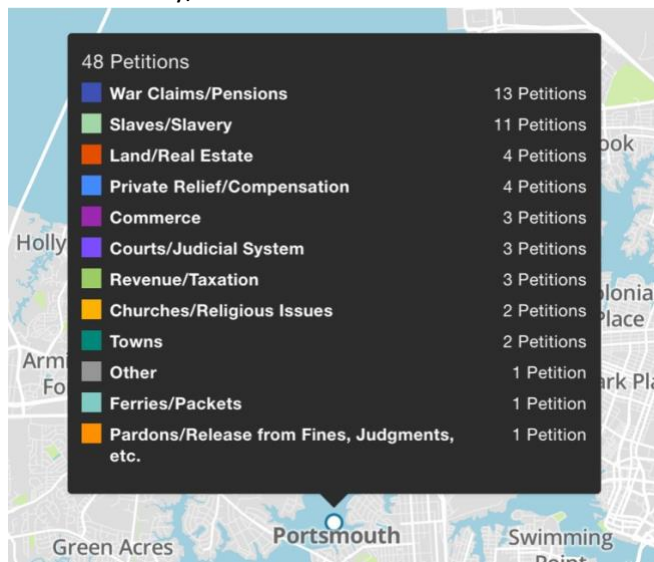


Comparing neighboring localities.

Norfolk City

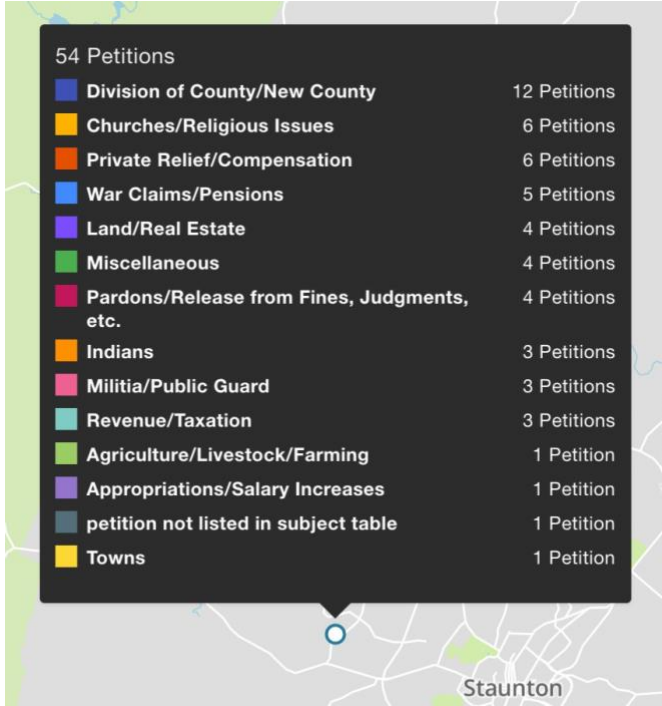


Norfolk County/Portsmouth Town

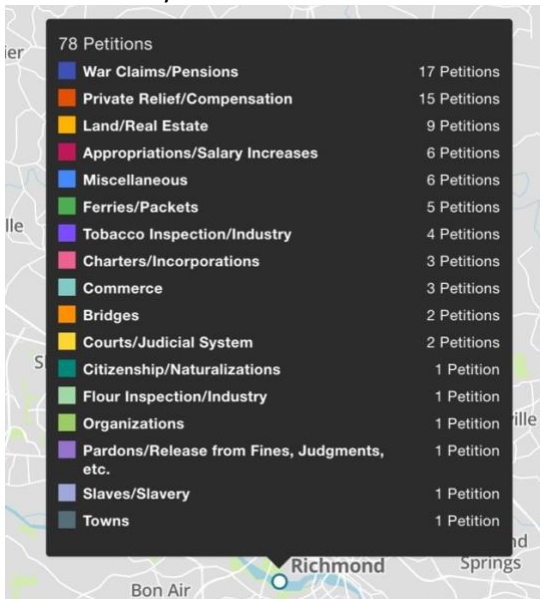


Or comparing across different regions:

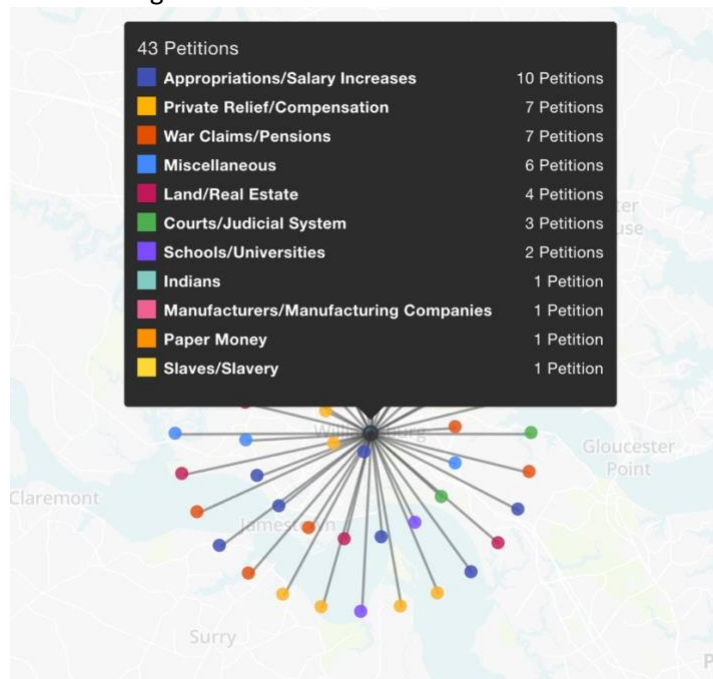
Augusta County



Richmond City



Williamsburg



[Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media](https://rrchnm.org/) (https://rrchnm.org/) examples

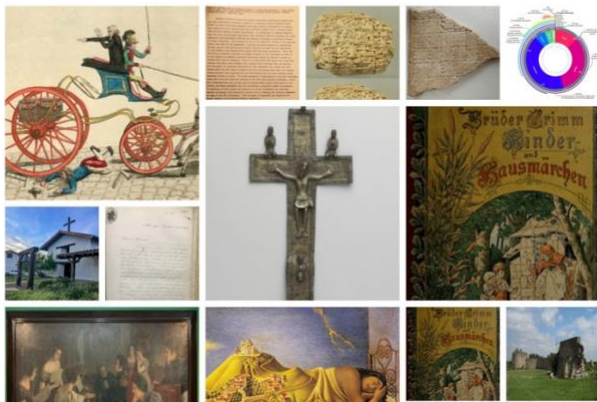
[World History Commons](https://worldhistorycommons.org/) (https://worldhistorycommons.org/)

WORLD HISTORY COMMONS

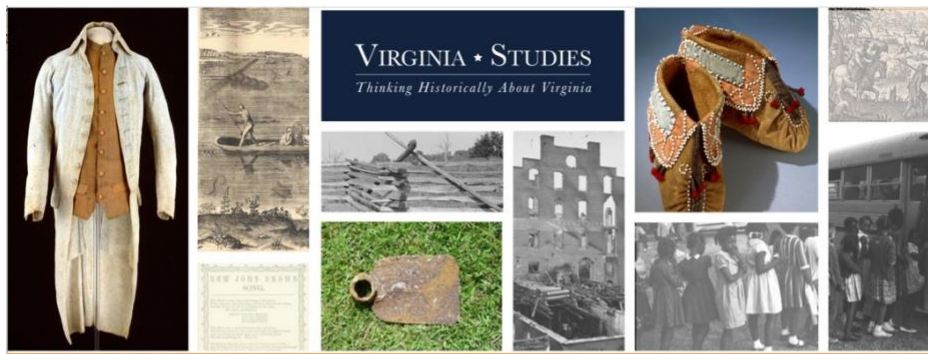
SEARCH

SOURCES | TEACHING | METHODS | REVIEWS

An open educational resource with peer-reviewed content for world and global history teachers, scholars, and students. This website provides more than 1,700 annotated primary sources, 100 teaching guides, 30 overviews of methods and approaches, and 250 website reviews. To learn more, consult [this guide](#) to using the site and our [video guides](#) for community college settings.



[Virginia Studies](https://virginiastudies.org/) (https://virginiastudies.org/)



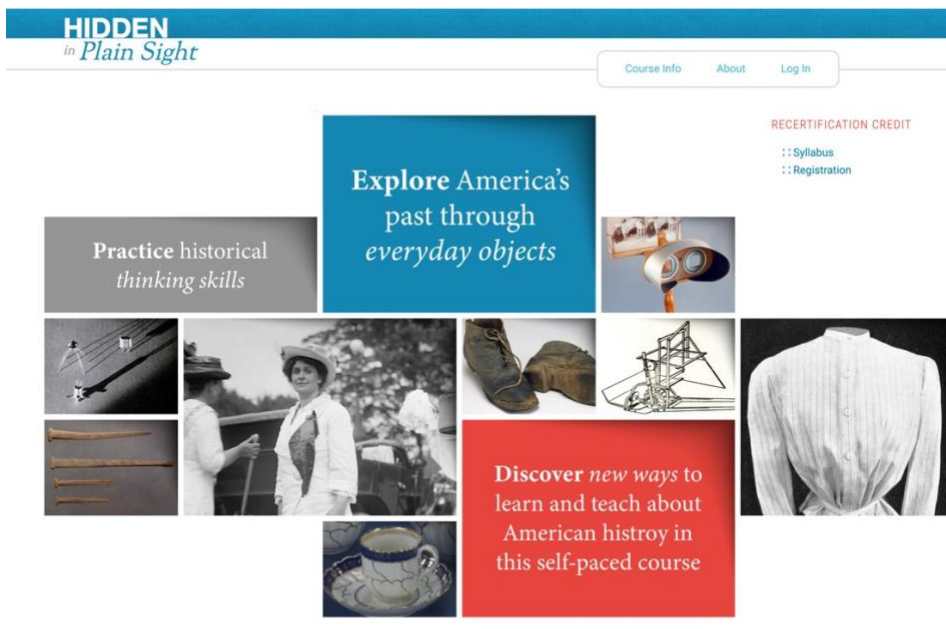
The banner for the Virginia Studies course features a collage of historical images: a white historical coat, a landscape painting, a document titled 'NEW JESUITS MOUND', a pair of beaded moccasins, a stone mortar, a brick building, and a group of people in historical dress. Below the collage is a navigation bar with 'COURSE INFO | REGISTER | LOG IN'.

VIRGINIA • STUDIES
Thinking Historically About Virginia

COURSE INFO | REGISTER | LOG IN

Virginia Studies: Thinking Historically about Virginia is an engaging, self-paced course for Virginia Studies teachers. The course is taught online through a series of interactive modules. Each module guides you through Virginia history with primary sources as well as video, audio, and text analysis. You will learn about the history of Virginia, practice historical thinking skills, and develop strategies for using course resources and techniques in the classroom.

[Hidden in Plain Sight](https://hipshistory.org/) (https://hipshistory.org/)



The banner for the Hidden in Plain Sight course features a collage of historical objects and images: a pair of shoes, a metal structure, a white shirt, a teacup, and a woman in historical dress. The text 'Explore America's past through everyday objects' is prominent in a blue box. Navigation links 'Course Info', 'About', and 'Log In' are at the top. A 'RECERTIFICATION CREDIT' section lists 'Syllabus' and 'Registration'. A red box at the bottom right says 'Discover new ways to learn and teach about American history in this self-paced course'.

HIDDEN
in Plain Sight

Course Info About Log In

RECERTIFICATION CREDIT
:: Syllabus
:: Registration

Practice historical thinking skills

Explore America's past through everyday objects

Discover new ways to learn and teach about American history in this self-paced course

Inside this site
Course Info
My Course
About

Contact Us
Email: chrm@gmu.edu
Phone: 703-993-9277
Fax: 703-993-4585

About Hidden in Plain Sight
Hidden in Plain Sight is an online course for practicing K-12 teachers designed to teach about America's past through everyday objects. [READ MORE](#) about the course »

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Making History with LVA:



“This is a wonderful opportunity to learn more about history and the people who actually lived through it, who are the best primary resources I can think of! Thanks for making this project available, it’s been very fun and very satisfying!”

“I really enjoy doing this! It's super fun, it's really important work, and it's easy to do on your own time, but it's more fun with a group. Doing it in person is interesting because you have other people and librarians to help you figure out what you're doing.”

“The Making History crowdsourcing program has been the most effective way to engage and support the community and state that I call home. Participating in this program continues to educate and enrich my understanding of the world we live in today. Thank you! Also, please make all the t-shirts available for purchase.”

“I like knowing that I’m helping to make documents more accessible. And helping to shine light on long hidden stories of people and places.”

“A direct link to Virginia history and my heritage which dates to the American Revolution.”

