

ARLINGTON'S COUNTY SURVEYOR OFFICE

By
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The County Surveyor was an office common in Virginia and in nearly all of the States. It was the duty of the county surveyor to execute any survey which might be ordered by the court or upon application of any individual or corporation, and to preserve a record of the surveys made by him. Surveys made by the official county surveyor were not necessarily conclusive, but could be reviewed by any competent tribunal, and the correctness thereof could be disputed. At the beginning of the twentieth century the county surveyor was responsible for all the surveys for county roads and the school system, and approved surveys made by independent, individual surveyors. It was his responsibility to make sure they conformed to criteria set by the Commonwealth of Virginia. This article will discuss the historical development of the office of the county surveyor in Virginia and will focus on Arlington County, Virginia, for that particular function.

The land surveyor was an important position in Virginia from Colonial times to the present. The availability of land in Virginia provided an opportunity for settlers of all classes and ranks in Europe to become land-owners. As settlers came to Virginia, a system of issuing patents and the division of lands developed. This was a new society where land signified wealth and was a prime attraction to the settlers.¹

As early as 1616, there were references by the Virginia Company of the need to send a surveyor who could lay out the lands to be distributed to the Colonists. Richard Norwood seems to be the earliest surveyor on record in the Virginia Colony in 1617. The office of the surveyor existed under the Company and William Claiborne, who came to the colony in 1621, was the first to fill the position effectively. As surveyor, Claiborne received the annual wage of thirty pounds sterling which was to be paid in tobacco. The Surveyor General was an appointee of the Governor from 1621-1624 and the King from 1624-1693.²

The General Assembly passed a law on March 5, 1624, stating: "That every privatt planters devident shall be surveyed and laid out in several and the bounds recorded by the survey; if there be any pettie differences betwixt neighbours about their devidents to be divided by the surveyor if of much importance to be referred to the governour and counsell: the surveyor to have 10 lbs. of tobacco upon every hundred acres."³ During March 24, 1655, a new law was passed by the General Assembly which "Ordered, That no surveyor or surveyors be elected but such as are chosen by the commissioners of such

counties where such occasion shall be offered, and those so chosen to be recommended to the said com's. by persons well experienced in the faculty ..."⁴ The Royal Charter of 1693 that established the College of William and Mary also granted that the office of the Surveyor General of Virginia be under the administration of the College trustees. Under this authority the College appointed county surveyors until after the Revolution.⁵ In 1779 it was provided that thenceforth the surveyor should be commissioned by the governor, but on the nomination of "the President and Professors of William and Mary College."⁶ In 1783, the nomination was transferred to the County Court, reserving, however, to the college the function of examining and certifying the ability of the Nominee.⁷

The specific duties of surveyors in Virginia are prescribed in an Act passed December 17, 1792, by the General Assembly, and the following are some excerpts: "a surveyor shall be nominated by the court of his county, examined, and certified able by the president and professors of William and Mary College, and if of good character, commissioned by the governor ... take an oath, and give bond, with two sufficient securities ..." "Every surveyor of lands, shall hereafter be resident in the county whereof he is surveyor, during the time he shall continue in office ..." "Every chief surveyor shall proceed with all practicable dispatch, to survey all lands entered for in his office ..." "That every surveyor shall ... express and declare, in or on the plat and return of each survey, ... the true quantity or degree of the variation (of the magnetic needle) and whether it be east or west." "The persons employed to carry the chain on any survey, shall be sworn by the surveyor, ... to measure justly and exactly, to the best of their abilities, and to deliver a true account thereof to such surveyor ..." "The surveyor shall, as soon as it can conveniently be done, and within three months at farthest after making the survey, deliver to his employer, or his order, a fair and true plat and certificate of such survey, the quantity contained, ... the courses and descriptions of several boundaries, natural and artificial ... expressing the names of such natural boundaries ... and the name of every person whose former lines made a boundary, and also the nature of the warrant and rights on which such survey was made." "The said plats and certificates shall be examined and tried by the said principal surveyor, whether truly made and legally proportioned as to length and breadth, and shall be entered with three months at farthest, after the survey is made, in a book well bound, to be provided by the court of his county at the county charge ..."⁸

In 1801 when Alexandria (Arlington) County was first established as part of the District of Columbia, the Circuit Court met at the court house in the city of Alexandria and appointed Simon Summers (-1836) as the first surveyor of Alexandria County.⁹ His family name is spelled variously as Summers, Somers, and Sommers. Later, members of his family preferred to spell their last name as Sommers. One of Simon Summers' first duties was to survey and plat the 10 acres of land adjacent to the Court House for a new site for the gaol (jail). For

the completion of this service, the Court authorized Simon Summers to collect \$10.00.¹⁰ In 1813, Simon Summers advocated the appointment of his son, John Augustine Sommers (-ca 1833), as Deputy Surveyor of Alexandria County which the Court approved.¹¹ When Simon Summers tendered his resignation as County Surveyor to the Court in 1826, his son, John A., was appointed to succeed him in this function.¹² Simon Summers had at least one son and five daughters. His son, John A. Sommers, had six children: Adelina Virginia, John W., Charles, Simon Lafayette, Abraham Henry, and Ann Elizabeth. Simon's grandson, Simon Lafayette Sommers, (ca. 1827-1914) was appointed the Surveyor of Alexandria County from 1852 to 1856. Therefore, three generations of the Sommers family were Surveyors of Alexandria County during the period 1801-1856. The 1860 Federal Census of Virginia indicates that Simon Sommers was living with his brother, John and family, on a farm in rural Alexandria (Arlington) County. Civil War records state that a S.L. Sommers served as an Assistant Engineer in a civilian capacity with the Confederate Chief Engineer's Office, Department of Northern Virginia. Vouchers in the national Archives show that S.L. Sommers was in charge of a survey party which did work on the military defenses around Lynchburg and Petersburg, Virginia. The name, S.L. Sommers, also appears upon Confederate Army topographic maps at 1:80,000 scale for Dinwiddie (1864) and Prince George (1863 and 1864) counties which are adjacent to Petersburg. His immediate supervisor was Captain Albert H. Campbell who was under the command of General Jeremy Francis Gilmer, Chief Engineer for the Engineer bureau in the Confederate Army. In his capacity as the County Surveyor of Alexandria (Arlington) county, Simon Lafayette Sommers usually signed his survey plats as S.L. Sommers. Therefore, we could probably assume that S.L. Sommers whose name appears on the Confederate Army maps was Simon Lafayette Sommers who had been a County Surveyor of Alexandria County, Virginia, prior to the Civil War.

Since its creation in 1634, the County Court in Virginia had performed administrative as well as judicial functions. When Alexandria (Arlington) County was established as a new county in Virginia in 1847 after the area was retroceded from the District of Columbia, a new administrative and judicial government was formed. Among the offices established was the office of the County Surveyor. In 1870 a new Constitution for the Commonwealth went into effect. It substantially modified the form of local government in Alexandria (Arlington) County by restricting the Court to judicial functions and creating a Board of Supervisors to administer the County. Alexandria (Arlington) County was divided into three Magisterial Districts with a Supervisor elected for each administrative division. Together they formed the County Board of Supervisors. The date of the election for local officials with terms of less than three years was the fourth Tuesday in May as it had been for all since 1851. The Constitution of 1902 which went into effect in 1904, set the

date for the election of all local elected officials in November and they took office the following January 1. This system remained unchanged until the County Manager form of Government went into effect in Arlington County in 1932. From 1870 to the present day, the constitutional officers have remained the same with one exception in Arlington. The position of County Surveyor has not been filled since 1932, the role of that official being filled by the head of the County Surveys Division, and to some extent rendered unnecessary by the almost complete platting and urbanization of the County.¹³

In 1847 the normal procedure for selecting a County Surveyor in Alexandria (Arlington) County was the recommendation by the County Court to the Governor of Virginia that a nominee was qualified as surveyor and eligible for a commission. Once the Governor's approval was obtained, the County Surveyor had to take the oaths required by law and to post a bond and securities. The amount of the bonds set by the County Court for the office of the County Surveyor seems to have varied from time to time. In 1850, Francis Johnson was required to post a \$3,000 bond;¹⁴ Simon Lafayette Sommers posted a \$1,000 bond in 1852;¹⁵ Thomas N. Carter in 1887 posted a \$500 bond;¹⁶ in 1891, Louis T. Haney posted a \$2,000 bond,¹⁷ and George E. Garrett posted a \$2,000 bond in 1901.¹⁸ The Arlington County Deed Books contain a few of the fees charged by the County Surveyors for their work. Thomas N. Carter charged Mr. Cassius F. Lee \$8.00 for surveying, platting, and calculating the Hampton tract of land on November 23, 1865;¹⁹ Thomas N. Carter was paid \$5.00 for surveying a 13 acre tract of land on October 28, 1869;²⁰ on December 5, 1870, he was paid \$60.00 for surveying, platting, and calculating land;²¹ and he collected \$5.25 on March 17, 1871;²² \$3.50 on August, 1873;²³ \$4.00 on October 15, 1874;²⁴ and \$16.00 on March, 1877,²⁵ for various surveying activities.

All descriptions of surveys are recorded by their linear and angular measurements in the Arlington County, Virginia, Deed Books. A few survey plats are also included, but it was not a common occurrence. Unfortunately, for historical purposes, only one survey book of plats and two "road books" showing rights-of-ways (1890-1924) by the office of the County Surveyor are extant in the Arlington County archives. The survey book of plats includes the following six survey plats made by Francis E. Johnston and Simon Lafayette Sommers:²⁶

1) Survey of James T. Ball 29 Acres at Ball's Crossroads, 5 May 1852, by F.E. Johnston, S.A.C. (Surveyor, Alexandria County).

2) Survey of Wm. Terrell (Crenett, Statt & Hoover Tracts), 31 May 1852, by F.E. Johnston, S.A.C.

3) Survey of Wm. Sewell (Vs. Andrew Hoover & Robert Cruitt) 22 August 1853, by S.L. Sommers, S.A.C.

4) Survey of Samuel Birch & Luke Osborn for a road, 11 August 1856, by S.L. Sommers, S.A.C.

5) Survey of road for Horatio Ball & Andrew Hoover Tract, 13 September 1854, by S.L. Sommers, S.A.C.

6) Special Survey by S.L. Sommers, S.A.C. of Piney Branch tract dispute by Gerrard Trammell & Henry Gunnell, 13 Oct. 1854.

An interesting notation appears in one of the Alexandria (Arlington) County Minute Books: "Court ordered that a survey and map of this county be made, showing all the streams, roads, and other important points and the costs of the same to be limited to \$1,500 and be levied for the years 1869 and 1870, in two equal portions. Resolved that Reuben Johnston, W. Blythe, H.L. Carne, S.R. Johnston, Oliver Cox, and Robert Ball, Jr. to direct the execution of said survey and map. Resolved that a copy of this order and resolutions be forwarded to the City Council with a request that they cooperate with the Court in such a survey and map as will do credit to the County and city."²⁷ There seems to be no further mention of this map in subsequent County Minutes. Perhaps they were unable to get cooperation from the Council in the city of Alexandria.

On May 23, 1870, a small and very limited survey or map appears in one of the Alexandria County Deed Books.²⁸ This map does show the division of Alexandria County into three magisterial districts of Jefferson, Arlington, and Washington. To the author's knowledge, no other official map of Alexandria County was compiled as a result of the court order. In 1879, Griffith Morgan Hopkins published an *Atlas of Fifteen Miles Around Washington: Including the Counties of Fairfax and Alexandria, Virginia*.²⁹ This was the best map of Alexandria County until the *1900 Map of Alexandria County, Virginia*, by Howell and Taylor, was published by the Virginia Title Company.³⁰

The following is a list of official County Surveyors for Alexandria (Arlington) County, Virginia, for the period of 1801-1932:

Name	Dates Served	Official References
Simon Summers	1801-1826	Alexandria County Order Book 1, p. 12
John A. Sommers	1828-1833?	" " Order Book 20, p. 563
Richard B. Alexander	1833-1842?	" " Deed Books
Francis E. Johnston	1842-1847?	" " Deed Books
Robert L. Brockett	1847-1850	" " Minute Book 1, p. 32
Francis E. Johnston	1850-1852	" " Minute Book 1, p. 321
Simon Lafayette Sommers	1852-1856	" " " " 2, p. 3
William T. Powell	1856-1858	" " " " 3, p. 74
John W. Bowen	1858-1864	" " " " 5, p. 374
Oliver Cox	1864-1870	" " " " 6, p. 196
Thomas N. Carter	1870-1891	" " " " 8, p. 269
Col. Jackson E. Sickles	1891-1899	" " " " 11, p. 333
Louis T. Haney	1899-1901	" " " " 13, p. 269
George E. Garrett	1901-1913	" " " " 14, p. 118
Henry Crocker	1913-1918	" " " " 4, p. 249
George E. Garrett	1919-1924	" " " " 5, p. 80
John T. Talman	1924-1926?	" " " " 6, p. 383

Name	Dates Served	Official References
Thomas N. DeLashmutt	1926-1928	Alexandria County Minute Book 6, p. 444
C.L. Kinnier	1928-1932?	" " " " 7, p. 3

Surveying in the present-day area of Arlington County, Virginia, was first recorded in the 17th century. During this time period, any County Surveyor could survey and plat land in Virginia. The earliest known survey in Arlington County occurred in 1669 when Robert Howson was granted a 6,000 acre (Virginia Land Records 6:262) tract of land extending from the present site of Rosslyn to and including the City of Alexandria.³¹ At that time, Arlington County was a part of Stafford County. The Howson deed and survey were recorded there, but the record has been lost. Daniel Jennings, Surveyor of Fairfax County, made a resurvey of the Howson Patent in 1746. This survey is recorded in the Fairfax County, Virginia, *Book of Surveys: 1742-1856*.³² A copy of this survey has been redrawn and appears on page 26 of C.B. Rose's *Arlington County, Virginia: A History*.³³ All of the remaining land in Arlington County was subsequently granted and survey plats prepared by various county surveyors.

In 1789 Virginia offered to cede ten miles square to the United States for the permanent seat of the general government. By proclamation of January 24, 1791, President Washington directed that a survey should be made and in 1791 definite boundaries for the new District of Columbia were established. An Act of Congress on February 27, 1801, formally organized Alexandria (Arlington) County out of Fairfax County. The Federal county of Alexandria remained a part of the District of Columbia until 1847 when it was returned to Virginia and at that time Arlington became the smallest county in the State.³⁴

The science of surveying and the platting of tracts of land has changed greatly since Colonial times. Today this function is accomplished by the professional surveyor who often has been trained academically in the School of Engineering in a college or university. All professional surveyors must pass a very difficult, but thorough examination to determine their knowledge and competence in their work before being authorized by the State of Virginia to perform this important duty.

A LIST OF SURVEYORS WHO HAVE BEEN INVOLVED IN THE SURVEYING AND PLATTING OF LANDS IN ARLINGTON COUNTY, VIRGINIA: FROM 1693 TO 1900*

Surveyor	Title if Known	Dates of Activity
Theodorick Bland	— Surveyor of Stafford County	1693
Thomas Gregg	— Surveyor of Stafford County	1708-1709
Thomas Hooper	— Surveyor of Stafford County	1716-1724
John Savage	— Surveyor of Stafford County	1722-1724
James Thomas	— Surveyor of Westmoreland County	1728-1729
John Warner	— Surveyor of King George's County	1728-1741

LIST OF SURVEYORS (continued)

Surveyor	Title if Known	Dates of Activity
Joseph Berry	— Surveyor of Prince William County	1741
Daniel Jennings	— Surveyor of Fairfax County	1742-1750
John West, Jr.	— Deputy Surveyor of Fairfax County	1748-1758
George Byrne	— Surveyor of Prince William County	1740-1745
Guy Broadwater	— Surveyor of Frederick County	1748
George West	— Surveyor of Loudoun County & Fairfax County	1755-1767
John Hough	— Surveyor of Loudoun County	1767-1779
George Washington	— Surveyor of Culpeper County	1785-86; 1799
Andrew Ellicott	— Surveyor of D.C. boundary lines	1791-1792
William Payne	— Surveyor of Fairfax County	1787-1811
Simon Summers	— Deputy Surveyor of Fairfax County, later Surveyor of Alexandria County, D.C.	1798-1801 1801-1813
Jonathan Lovett	—	1801
John Mathias	— Surveyor of Loudoun County	1820
John J. Mathias	— Deputy Surveyor of Loudoun County	1820
John A. Sommers	— Surveyor of Alexandria County, D.C.	1813-1828
Lewis Carberry	— Surveyor of Washington County, D.C.	1835-1858
Richard B. Alexander	— Surveyor of Alexandria County	1836
John H. Halley	— Surveyor of Fairfax County	1837-1838
James Compton	—	1838
Michael Purcell	—	1844
Nathan Loomis	— Surveyor	1847
Caleb S. Hallowell	— Surveyor	1849
Francis E. Johnston	— Surveyor of Alexandria County	1842-1857
Simon L. Sommers	— Surveyor of Alexandria County	1851-1856
William L. Fraser	—	1857
James Thrift	— Surveyor of Fairfax County	1859
William Blythe	—	1865
Oliver Cox	— Surveyor of Alexandria County	1865-1869
E.C. Morrison	—	1868
Thomas N. Carter	— Surveyor of Alexandria County	1865-1893
Levi Deming	— Surveyor of Fairfax County	1870
William N. Reed	— County Surveyor	1870-1900
W.D. Stuart, C.E.	—	1875
William Forsyth	— Surveyor of D.C.	1876
Washington Blythe	— Engineer	1880
Colonel Jackson E. Sickles	— Surveyor of Alexandria Co.	1891-1899
L.H. Hyer	—	1889-1898
Louis T. Haney	— Surveyor of Alexandria County	1899-1901
Henry A.D. Crocker	— Surveyor, Falls Church	1891-1900
H.W. Brewer	— Surveyor	1900
A.T. Holtzman	— Surveyor	1900
D.J. Howell	— Surveyor, D.C.	1900

*Based on records found in the Virginia Land Office, Fairfax and Alexandria (Arlington) County Deed and Survey Books.

FOOTNOTES

¹W. Stitt Robinson, Jr., *Mother Earth: Land Grants in Virginia, 1607-1699*. Jamestown 350th Anniversary Historical Booklet, Number 12, Richmond: Garrett and Massie, Inc., 1957.

²Dr. J.T. Baldwin, Jr., "The College of William and Mary and Surveying in Early Virginia." *Surveying and Mapping*, Vol. XVIII, No. 2, 1958, p. 179-185.

³William Waller Hening, *The Statutes at Large: Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia*. (Hening 1, p. 125).

⁴Hening 1, p. 404.

⁵Fairfax Harrison, *Landmarks of Old Prince William*. Berryville, Virginia: Chesapeake Book Company, 1964, p. 651.

⁶Hening X, p. 53.

⁷Hening XI, p. 352.

⁸Samuel Shephard, *The Statutes at Large of Virginia*. New York: AMS Press, Inc., Vol. 1, p. 64.

⁹Alexandria County, Virginia, *Court Orders 1*, p. 12 (April 13, 1801).

¹⁰*Ibid.*, Alexandria County, Virginia *Court Orders 1*, p. 340 (July 7, 1801).

¹¹Alexandria County, Virginia, *Court Orders 11*, p. 288 (November 2, 1813).

¹²Alexandria County, Virginia, *Court Orders 20*, p. 563 (April 10, 1826).

¹³Cornelia B. Rose, Jr., "County Officials in Arlington: 1870-1960." *Arlington Historical Magazine* (1967), p. 36.

¹⁴Alexandria County, Virginia, *Minute Book 1*, p. 321.

¹⁵Alexandria County, Virginia, *Minute Book 2*, p. 3.

¹⁶Alexandria County, Virginia, *Minute Book 10*, p. 433.

¹⁷Alexandria County, Virginia, *Minute Book 13*, p. 269.

¹⁸Alexandria County, Virginia, *Minute Book 15*, p. 39.

¹⁹Alexandria County, Virginia, *Deed Book 9*, p. 42.

²⁰Alexandria County, Virginia, *Deed Book Liber A*, p. 13.

²¹*Ibid.*, op. cit., *Deed Book Liber A*, p. 365.

²²*Ibid.*, op. cit., *Deed Book Liber A*, p. 370.

²³Alexandria County, Virginia, *Deed Book Liber B*, p. 233.

²⁴*Ibid.*, op. cit., *Deed Book Liber B*, p. 410.

²⁵Alexandria County, Virginia, *Deed Book Liber D*, p. 93.

²⁶Alexandria County, Virginia, *Surveying Book: 1852-56*.

²⁷Alexandria County, Virginia, *Minute Book 7*, p. 319.

²⁸*Ibid.*, Alexandria County, Virginia, *Deed Book Liber A*, p. 205.

²⁹Griffith Morgan Hopkins, *Atlas of 15 Miles Around Washington Including the Counties of Fairfax and Alexandria, Virginia*. 87 p., 48 maps. Philadelphia: G.M. Hopkins, 1879. See p. 66-67 for 1:126,720 map of Alexandria County.

³⁰Howell and Taylor, *Map of Alexandria County, Virginia, for the Virginia Title Co.*, 1:10,800, Washington, D.C.: A.b. Graham, 1900.

³¹Donald A. Wise, "Early Land Grants in Arlington County, Virginia. *Arlington Historical Magazine* (1973), p. 23.

³²Fairfax County, Virginia, *Record of Surveys: 1742-1856*. p. 11.

³³C.B. Rose, Jr., *Arlington County, Virginia: A History*. Baltimore: Port City Press, Inc., 1976, p. 26-27.

³⁴Office of the County Manager, *A History of the Boundaries of Arlington County, Virginia*, Arlington, Virginia, 1967, 42 p.