

Primary Resource Comprehension: The Case of the Stolen Chickens



Reporting Category: Virginia Studies

Topic: Political Growth; Civil War & Postwar Eras; Virginia 1900 to Present

Primary SOLs: VS.1, VS. 10

Related SOLs: VS.6, VS. 7

Materials: Interactive Video; Primary Source Document; Comprehension Worksheet; Enrichment Activity (see attached).

Directions:

- Students will watch an educational video illustrating the following concepts:
 - o A brief history of why the Brentsville Courthouse is significant to Prince William County.
 - o How historians use those documents to learn about the past and the importance learning to read and write.
 - o Video will tie into the worksheet that students will have to complete as part of their lesson.
- Complete Worksheet

Context:

The Importance of Brentsville Courthouse

Brentsville is an important place in the history of Prince William County. From 1822 to 1893 it served as the county seat of Prince William where all matters of county business took place. It is also where all the County records were kept during this time. There are three public buildings that made up the core of the county seat: the courthouse, the jail, and the Clerk's office.

Many different actions of business took place in the county Courthouse. It is where people voted, paid taxes, disputed both criminal (breaking the law) or civil cases (cases involving

money or property), validated deeds and wills, and more. Those who were awaiting trial for criminal cases would be kept in the Brentsville Jail until it was time for their case to be heard.

Everything that transpired in the Brentsville Courthouse was documented by the County Clerk and many of those records were kept in the Clerk's Office. These documents ranged from deeds, wills, and receipts to minute books and court transcriptions. Since they are official documents of Prince William County, every time the county seat moves, these documents go with them. They are still preserved by the Clerk of the Court today in Manassas.

The Importance of Primary Resources

These documents serve as valuable **Primary Resources** to Prince William County's history. A primary resource is a first-hand document written or drawn by someone who was there. That means these deeds, wills, court transcripts, records, and more were written nearly 200 years ago by the Clerk of the Court or who people that were there. They give us valuable information and tell historians a lot about people in Prince William County. They tell us who lived in the county and where, how families are related, who owned certain property, what kind of jobs people had and how they lived. These documents can also tell us about how roads and buildings were built, what kinds of arguments people had, what people believed in and what they cared about.

Historians use primary resources all the time to learn about history and how it affected the world we live in today. To practice your reading and comprehension skills, read and comprehend one of the court cases that was recorded by Prince William County.

Exercise: (See attached)

Name: _____



Be a History Detective and go to the Source!

Watch the accompanying video telling the story of Brentsville Courthouse and the importance of primary resources. Then read the primary resource and answer the questions on the following pages.

On June 8, 1850, Lewin Vermillion of Loudoun County went to James D. Tennille, a justice of the peace, or magistrate, for Prince William County, and said that Rebecca Davis had in her possession stolen **fowls** that belonged to his sister-in-law, Jane Vermillion. An argument took place about who owned the chickens and so a trial was held on June 10th, 1850, to decide whether or not Rebecca Davis bought stolen chickens, and what to do with them.

Jane Vermillion had a farm in Loudon County that she ran by herself, but she has many brothers-in-laws who helped her. She raised livestock and chickens, but in March, fifteen of her chickens and two roosters were stolen. As time went on, she gave up trying to get her chickens back. But one day, many members of her family spotted chickens like the ones she used to have on a few farms in Prince William County and Jane wanted them back.

Jane's daughter, Elisha, said that she saw a blue/grey hen, a brown hen, and a black and dark red rooster at farm shows in Loudoun and Prince William Counties who were shown by Rebecca Davis. They looked like her chickens but the tails were different. The feathers were cut. Johnathon Vermillion saw a few more of these chickens with their tails cut at another farm owned by a man known as "Old Charles". When he asked Charles where he got the chickens, he said he got them from

from a woman named Hezikiah Crosen, who had some of these fowls on her farm. When Hezikiah was asked where she got them, Hezikiah said she got the chickens from Rebecca Davis.

More of Jane's family, Thomas and Luin Vermillion, saw two **speckled** hens and one yellow hen with a cut tail on Rebecca's farm. A man named Sydnor Rust lived on the same farm as Rebecca. They asked Sydnor where Rebecca got the chickens. He said that Rebecca bought them back in February from a couple of people travelling through town. One day in the spring, Rebecca asked Sydnor to go and catch all the chickens so that she could cut their tail feathers so everyone knew they were hers. He didn't know anything about the chickens being stolen, but he could not say who exactly the chickens were purchased from. When they finally asked Rebecca, she got angry and she said bought them from some people passing through and paid her money for them. In fact, she said if that anybody would bring her any more chickens she would buy them as well, she did not care who they belonged to.

Finally, Rebecca was brought in front of the court and they asked her about where she got the chickens and her conversation with the Vermillion family members. She again said she bought them from some people traveling through town. She paid money for them, but did not have any papers that said she did and they could not find the people that sold her the chickens. But, she said that because she paid for them using money, they were hers. The trial then went to the **jury** where they made a decision about the chickens.

After hearing all the stories from the Vermillion family, neighbors, Sydnor, and Rebecca, they had a decision to make. Did Rebecca purchase stolen chickens or were they really for sale? Do you think the chickens should all go back to Jane Vermillion or should Rebecca Davis be allowed to keep them?



Name: _____

Observation & Interpretation

Answer the Questions below.

1. This court case, takes place in the year _____, From the primary source, where would Rebecca have been able to buy chickens (fowls) in this time period? _____
2. What is the main idea of the case? _____
3. Where were the chickens stolen? _____
4. What are the facts of the case? _____
5. Who are the witnesses called to testify in the case?

6. Where did the witnesses see the chickens? _____
7. What is your opinion about the case? Do you think the chickens were stolen or not, why?

8. Where did this primary resource come from? Why is it important? _____

Name: _____

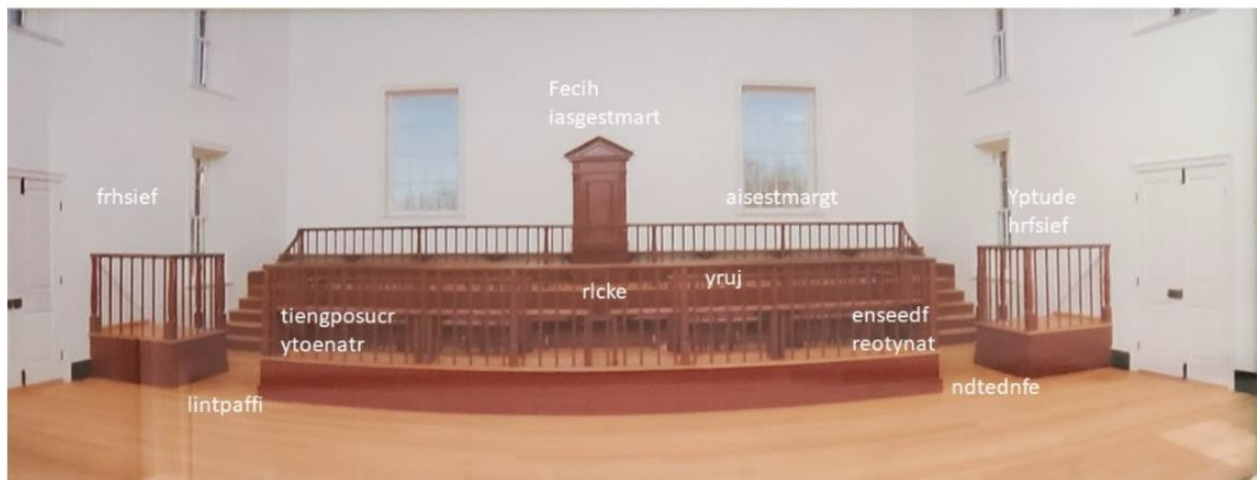


Enrichment Activity

The person bringing a law suit is called the **plaintiff** and he/she hires a **prosecuting attorney** who argues for the plaintiff in the courtroom. The person accused is called the **defendant** and he/she is represented by a **defense attorney** who argues for the defendant in the courtroom. The **chief magistrate** is the senior judge who is in charge of the courtroom, and he is joined by up to 9 other **magistrates**. They make sure that both attorneys stick to the rules. The **sheriff** and **deputy sheriff** keep order in the courtroom. The **clerk** takes notes of everything that is said. The **jury** is made up of citizens who decide if the defendant is guilty or innocent.

Here is a picture of a Brentsville courtroom in 1822. Can you unscramble the words to show where each person should sit?

Brentsville Courthouse courtroom - 1822



1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____