

Rosie, Probate Transcript

Q: So let's start with a general. Can you just tell us about probate records a category, as a kind of primary source? [00:00:08]

Rosie: Okay. Well, um, probate records are records that were usually taken by a government, governmental agency, usually the county court, um, when someone died and usually but not always there's a will and in addition to the will, there would often be, um, start over—[00:00:41]

Q: Okay. That's fine.

Rosie: Okay. So when a person died in the 18th century, it was necessary for the government to figure out what they owned when they died so that, um, the— the items could be passed on to the appropriate heirs and all the people who were owed money, the creditors, would be paid what they were owed from the estate, okay? [00:01:12] And if a person died with a will, then, um, the— the, you know, after the creditors were paid off, then the goods would be divided among the— the heirs in the will. If the person died intestate without a will, then the, um, proceeds would be divided by law according to a series of— of rules according to who was the closest relative or living— living relation, so it was part of the process of dividing up the goods after— after a person died. [00:01:49]

Q: What exactly does probate record mean?

Rosie: Probate. Um, it's— Probate—

Q: I don't either. I know she just asked me out of curiosity [laughs]. [00:02:02]

Rosie: Uhhh, hmmm, probate [laughs] I don't know. Refers to wills and inventory. It refers to what happens in— in the courts after the person dies. [00:02:15]

Q: Did they do this whether you had a will? If you had a will, did they— Or not, they did this. The will was just the process of how you divided it up.

Rosie: Okay. The issue is really probate records are skewed to people who had more property because if you died without, um, without a will and you had very little property there was no need to go through the courts because it just wasn't a measurable sum of money, um, but people who owned more movable goods as well as more real estate, um, tended to have more property and were therefore more likely to go through probate and leave probate records. [00:02:55]

Um, if you died without a will, the court could still require an inventory because you might well have creditors who were owed money from the estate so, you know, it wasn't necessary— necessary that you had a will, but if you had a will and were fairly well off, it was— it was likely that your— your, um, estate would go through probate. [00:03:20]

Q: And what kind of physical document was it? It's a legal document. It's a written document. What did it sort of look and feel like. Where did they sit?

Rosie: Usually in Virginia in the county court in the Chesapeake in general in the county court offices. [00:03:36]

Q: Could I ask you to sort of start over and say that. These are text documents.

Rosie: Oh, okay.

Q: _____ [hundred.

Rosie: Oh, okay. All right. So, what kinds of documents are they? They were written by someone appointed by the court, um, and they— the— what— what was involved was the person would go to the individual's home and go room by room to look at what was in the house and to actually record every item that they observed and also to get an accounting of what was owed to them and what they were owed and so, yeah, they were hand-written documents. They were kept in the county courts. They were administered by the county court justices, um, yes. [00:04:32]

Q: And how— Who actually went out and assessed the value of various things?

Rosie: There would be someone appointed by the court. Um, it wouldn't necessarily be a court official, but it would be someone assigned by the court that who would have a good sense of the— the value of things, you know, a— a, you know, a high-ranking official in the community, um, you know, somebody of good reputation in the community, a merchant, um, um, a big planter, someone like that. [00:05:03]

Q: And this may come up later, but how— how— how much variation was there between if two different people went and did this assessment, could you have two wildly different conclusions about how much this person's estate was worth, or would they generally be—[00:05:19]

Rosie: Uh, oh, I think there was a lot of subjectivity because, you know, you were judging the condition of things, you were judging, you know, you were judging the quality of goods. You were judging, um, their, their market value, so I think there was a wide variability. [00:05:37]

Q: Sorry. One other just technical note. If you need to turn the paper, just if you can not talk. Turn the paper and then talk or actually you know what we can do is just take out the staple. Thank you. Otherwise we hear crinkles. Um, what's the general time period we're talking about? [00:06:00]

Rosie: For probate records or for, um, the one that I'm looking in particular?

Q: _____

Rosie: Well, probate records exist in the Chesapeake area from the early 17th century through the 18th century into the 19th century, um, they were part of the process of— of settling estates for a long time, um, this particular person that whose— whose inventories I'm looking at is from 1759, so that's the late Colonial period. [00:06:39]

Q: How were these— Well, how are these used? You've told us a little bit but, again, the more times we can say things in different ways—

Rosie: Yeah.

Q: We never know exactly what's going to end up being used. [00:06:52]

Rosie: Okay. All right. Well, okay, after a person died, it was necessary for the county officials to determine the value of the estate and to pay off all the creditors to the estate and one thing you have to remember is this was a society that was run on credit and it wasn't credit cards, it was bookkeeping credit and debts and so it was very likely at any given time that any one person had— had loaned money or goods to someone and was owed money or goods and so when the person died, before the estate— the heirs could receive whatever of value was left from the estate, the estate had to be, um, valued, evaluated by the officials, the government officials and then the creditors would have to be paid off and only then could the heirs receive what was owed to them. [00:08:03] So, then, um, the county court would appoint some officials, um, often ordinary people who would go to the person's home and make a room-by-room list of what was in each room and assign a valuation to it and submit it to the court and the court would make sure the debts were paid and, as I said, then— then the heirs could be given the proceeds. [00:08:32]

Q: What kinds of things can you learn from probate records?

Rosie: Oh, you could learn a lot. You can learn about social class. You can learn about the ownership of slaves. You can own about— Um, you can learn about, um, what kinds of goods were imported from abroad, what was homemade. You could learn what was kept in different rooms. Just enormous number of different things. [00:09:05]

Q: Can you give a couple of examples of one or two of those?

Rosie: Okay.

Q: Not necessarily from this one but just in general sort of how would the organization of the rooms help you understand their life? [00:09:16]

Rosie: Um, well, for example, where— If they had a spinning wheel, where did they keep it. Did they keep it in their bedroom? Did they keep it in the hall? Did they keep it in a parlor? Did they keep it in the kitchen? Um, you know, it— It's interesting where

they kept things. If they had books, where did they keep those. In their bedroom and, um, and in— in the parlor, where, you know, um, what else could— What else— Other kinds of things, um—[00:09:53]

Q: I know one thing that might be surprising for modern people is that all the spices and some of those things being kept in the bedroom closet.

Rosie: Ohhhh, if they had a closet.

Q: Yeah.

Rosie: Yeah. Why is that? I don't even know why. [00:10:11]

Q: Um, the lady of the house would keep things like spices under lock and key.

Rosie: Uh huh.

Q: And then dole them out on a daily basis to the cooks.

Rosie: Uh huh.

Q: So—

Q: And then did different types of people keep different things in different places? I mean, well—[00:10:28]

Rosie: Well, it depends on the size of the house. I mean, that's actually what I find most interesting is the fact that these inventories show you how big the houses were and— Or maybe how little the houses were and so what was crammed into each room and how many different kinds of activities took place in each room because there were a lot of different things going on and in some houses you might have people sleeping in the same room that they were cooking or you would have, you know, five or six people sleeping in the same bedroom or, um, you know, you wouldn't have— You would have a kitchen but it would be detached from the rest of the house so, you know, the— the— The fact that some of these are organized by rooms just gives you more insight into the way ordinary life was lived in this distant time. [00:11:24]

Q: What kinds of questions do you ask of probate records or can you ask?

Rosie: Okay. Well, the first thing is who— Who is this the record of and where, um, and you try and find that on a map. You find the place. You find out when the probate record was recorded and contextualize that, decide what else was going on in the community, in the colony or state and in the country at the time and you figure out, you know, what— What else might have been going on the time that might have an impact in a general or specific way on this person's life. [00:12:13]

Q: What else you mentioned before about imported versus homemade goods? How can we sort of ask questions about what that tells about trade?

Rosie: Uh huh—

Q: _____

Rosie: Um, partly it's— Some of this stuff you have to just know the kinds of goods that were being imported at the time, but a lot of times they'll be more specific and say, you know, a Dutch oven or Holland cloth or something that was definitely imported from abroad, um, you know, china was imported from— From abroad or glass was imported from abroad, by and large. Silks were imported. Spices were obviously imported, um, so the— Generally speaking, the more of these imported goods there are in a home, the more likely that the— the family, the person, was of a higher social status and conversely, the fewer of those goods, the less well off, but as I said, probate records in general are skewed towards wealthier members of society because poor people just simply did not have enough goods of value to— That needed to be taken to probate, so— It's degrees of wealth that you're trying to figure out in these records. [00:13:40]

Q: Why don't you look at the one specific one and then we can sort of ask more broad questions later. What do you first notice about this specific probate record?

Rosie: Okay. This is Sarah Green and it was ordered on June 7th— June 20th. Okay. Sarah Green, June 20th, 1757 in York County, Virginia, so it's a woman and that fact in and of itself is significant because most probate records from this time would be from men and the only women who would show up in these probate records would most likely be widows. Why? [00:14:28] Well, because married women could not own property of their own. Single women were unlikely to have accumulated enough property to have to go to probate, but widows are the ones who are most likely to have benefited from whatever their husband did for a living, most likely being a farmer or a planter and to be the beneficiary of an estate, so it would be women who outlived their husbands who were widows who had some amount of wealth that would be necessary to take to the probate court. [00:15:10]

Q: Can you explain a little bit more about why married women couldn't own property, what those laws were?

Rosie: Okay. That's a traditional English law that was transplanted to all of the North American British colonies, um, and the idea there is that the husband and wife form a single economic unit and that once a woman gets married she's under the guardianship of her husband and she no longer has the right to own property or to sue or be sued in court or to make contracts, um, or to— to own land, in particular. She can own a small number of personal goods but she can't own substantial num— substantial personal property or substantial real property and so women then are under the guardianship of their husbands, but when— And this is a— This is an idea called coverture and as long as the woman was married she was under the— the guar— guardianship or restrict— restrictions of

her husband. Um, if her husband died, though, then she gained some kind of independence and once again, she could act like a— a male property owner. She could sue or be sued in court, make contracts, um, own the property. [00:16:42]

The problem is if she remarried, then the new husband would once again gain the title to her property, all the property that she brought into the marriage and this was a problem especially if a woman had children and so there was something that we call a jointure or they called a jointure, but what we would call like a prenuptial agreement that would protect the woman's property— I should say that again. [00:17:15]

Okay, so if a woman remarried, she could protect the property that she brought into a second marriage through something that was called a jointure or we'd call a prenuptial agreement and by this written agreement, the new husband would be prohibited by law from controlling, selling or divesting himself of the property that she brought into the marriage and the idea behind this was that it was to protect the previous estate for the children of the prior marriage. [00:17:53]

Now, in practice, the lines were often blurred and second husbands sometimes dipped into the estate of the former husband and did things they weren't supposed to, um, but theoretically there were protections for the children of the first marriage and for the woman going into a subsequent marriage. [00:18:14]

Q: And how common— What were the mortality rates in this period? How common was it for people to die, remarry?

Rosie: Well, in the 17th century, the mortality rates in Virginia were horrendous. They— I mean, people were unlikely to live to their 50th birthday. By the 18th century, the birth and death rate had evened out, so Virginia was replenishing its population and people were living longer. They still weren't living nearly as long as— as in New England. There was a— a greater incidence of disease, it was a warmer climate. The people were more susceptible to a variety of diseases, but, um, people could live to age 50 or 60 and so that was not uncommon by the mid 18th century in Colonial Virginia, but, as I say, that's not nearly as long as in New England at the time where it was not unusual for someone to live to age 70. [00:19:19]

Q: And when would the laws of property ownership of coverture change for _____ a woman living in Virginia?

Rosie: Oh, not til the 19th century. Not— I mean, you get the first married women's property laws in the United States in the 1840s and in Virginia, it's later than that, so women for a long time in Virginia had very few legal rights when it came to property. [00:19:49]

Q: So keep going with Sarah Green.

Rosie: Okay. So, Sarah Green from York County. York County is an older county in Virginia, settled in 1634 so it's an older county on the east coast of Virginia. Um, this inventory was ordered on June 20th, 1757, so that was during the French & Indian War so there would be a lot of, um— There would be a lot upheaval going on in other parts of the North American British colonies, though not so much in Virginia at this time. There wasn't a lot of fighting in Virginia at this point in the French & Indian War. It would be centered more in Canada and upstate New York. Still, um, Virginia was facing the threat of Indians, the threat of French attacks on its frontier. [00:20:49]

In York County Sarah Green would have been shielded from those attacks. I mean, she was far from the frontier, but she probably would've been asked to pay higher taxes for the support of the French & Indian War and as— I'm going to guess that she was a— a widow. She would've had to pay taxes even though she was not allowed to vote, so one of the discrepancies that emerge in Colonial America is that there is believed to be a relationship between taxation and representation for all people except widows who paid taxes, but are not allowed to vote. [00:21:30]

Q: Is there anything in here that would tell us if she was a widow except that she owns versus a single woman?

Rosie: You would need to see that will and that's the thing that I most noticed when I look at the inventory. I would love to see the will, if there is one, that goes along with this inventory, but I would be reasonably confident in saying that she was a widow because I find it very unlikely that a single woman could ever accumulate the amount of property that she has accumulated and the— the fine goods that she's accumulated, so I— I am fairly confident that she's a widow. [00:22:13]

Q: What do you notice in some of the specific items as you read through this probate?

Rosie: Um, okay, oops. What do I notice? All right. Um, I notice a lot of goods that are considered or could be considered fine goods, expensive goods. For example, there are silk chairs, there are— There's a silver teapot, silver s— teaspoons. There's a looking glass. Looking glasses were expensive and hard to come by. There's a silk patchwork quilt. There are damask napkins. [00:23:04]

There are slaves and what's very interesting here is that the biggest proportion of her estate is made up of the value of the slaves, so, if you look, there's Bridget who's valued at 30 pounds; Sarah, a girl, valued at 30 pounds; Sam, a boy, worth 40 pounds and notice right there, that a boy slave is worth more than a girl slave, presumably because he could work in the fields, the tobacco fields, whereas a girl slave would be— She could work in the tobacco fields but she would be more likely to be a domestic or to take care of the children or perhaps not to be able to work as hard in the fields as a male slave. Lambert, a slave, 50 pounds; London, a slave, 50 pounds; and Robin, that's presumably a male as well, worth 50 pounds, so slaves make up the biggest proportion of her— of her, um, estate, so what that tells you is that a lot of wealth of Virginians, wealthy Virginians at this time was made up of human property. [00:24:28]

And actually slaves were one of the few kinds of property that were often inherited by women, that girls often received when their parents died, their father or mother died, and that could be passed down to the woman. Property, you know, land could be passed down, but it was less often the case in Colonial Virginia. It was more often slaves that were passed down. Land usually went to the male heirs. [00:25:01]

So, I notice all those things. Um, she had some pewter dishes. Those would be presumably ordinary dishes for ordinary daily meals. There was a copper still. That— That seems to be very vvv— valuable for making liquor presumably or probably making cider, hard cider. Um, brass candlesticks, copper teakettles, so, as I say, there're lots of— Lots of goods here that— that were imported and that suggest that they or she was wealthy. [00:25:47]

What you also see, though, is that she probably was very old because in the valuation, a lot of the items are referred to as old or very old, so you have an old black table; you have 10 pairs of sheets, very old; nine tablecloths, very old; two old tables; one large kettle, very old; and this goes along with my theory that she's probably a widow and what that suggests is that her husband may have died quite some time ago and that she hasn't had the means since her husband died to replace these things, so when her husband was alive, they were fairly well off, they could buy a lot of these goods, but then after her husband died, she had quite fine goods but she couldn't buy new things, so I think she was probably fairly old and her husband probably died quite some time ago. [00:26:46]

Also other things that indicate her status—a leather-bottomed walnut chair. A lot of different pictures. Pictures were not common. There's a picture of the seasons and that's valued, um, 12 of those pictures are valued at 4 pounds 16. Maps of the world, two very old pictures, an historical picture of Rachel and Leah, the Biblical sisters. Those were unusual at the time and, um, probably not made by local artists, probably imported because there just weren't too many local artists at the time making or painting pictures, so that also suggests wealth. Mahogany teaboard, leather chairs, those suggest wealth. [00:27:41]

As I said, there're a number of things made of silk that suggest wealth, so there's a lot of indications here that, um, that they were wealthy. Books and desks, a parcel of old books and a bookcase as well as a desk. Those things suggest literacy. Those things suggest that either Sarah Green's husband or Sarah Green herself could read, um, and in Colonial Virginia, while literacy was not rare, it was not nearly as common as in New England, so in New England about this time, 1757, perhaps 80% of all adults males could read and 60, 50 to 60% of all women could read in New England, but half of those numbers, those proportions, could read in Colonial Virginia so maybe only 20 to 30% of all adult white women in Colonial Virginia could read, so either Sarah Green was one of the fairly rare examples of a literate woman— woman or more likely, her husband could read. [00:29:00]

Q: I was just saying that when you put your hands up here, it presses the mic into your—

Rosie: Oh, okay.

Q: And so if you could keep your hands a little _____. Sorry.

Q: What can you make of the six slaves? Again, a lot of students that have the kind of vision of a huge plantation and aren't as familiar with the diversity of the experience of slaves. [00:29:24]

Rosie: Yes. The fact that she had six slaves suggests that she didn't have a large plantation, but that doesn't mean her husband didn't have a large plantation and when— When a husband died, by law, a woman was entitled to, uh, the widow thirds, her dower share, that was one-third of the estate and that might well have been one-third of the number of slaves on the husband's estate. Even so, that's not a huge number of slaves, 36, but still that's— That's a more substantial number, so either, um, Bridget— Um, either Sarah Green is just the recipient of a small portion of her husband's estate and slaves, or else he was a small prosperous farmer who made his wealth from perhaps selling goods, you know, being a merchant or trader or something like that, but a large number of people in Colonial Virginia did not own a huge number of slaves, so, you know, it wasn't uncommon for a person to own only one or two slaves. [00:30:45]

It's interesting, though, that she had three young slaves, you know, I would say— Well, at least two young slaves, Sarah, a girl, and Sam, a boy, so does that mean then that Bridget and one of the male slaves were married and these were their children perhaps. That's very common that slaves would be kept together as families. Um, it's just hard to know, but a large number of slaves in Colonial Virginia lived on small farms rather than on large plantations. [00:31:30]

Q: Can we make anything of the girl being named Sarah? It's spelled the same.

Rosie: Um, because it's the same name as the— She probably named her. It was not uncommon for the slave masters to name the children of the slaves and so sometimes we can tell from the naming patterns whether they're English names and, of course, Sarah would be an English or a Biblical name or whether it's a sort of exotic Africanized name in which case it might be from the slaves themselves giving the name. A lot of times there would names that harken back to ancient Greece or Rome and that is likely that the— the master would give that name. Um, these seem like pretty standard English names, though, and, well, it's impossible to say. It's not unlikely that the master or mistress gave these names to the slaves. [00:32:32]

Q: What can we tell at the very bottom it talks about the mortgage?

Rosie: Uh huh.

Q: The mortgage and two years interest _____. Can you explain that a little bit?

Rosie: Well, a lot of people in Colonial Virginia both owed debts and had debts owed to them and so they— that Sarah Green very likely or her husband may well have put up the money for Nicholas Water to buy land or property and so he was paying her back for this— this loan and so this was— this was what he owed and this was the interest; 215 pounds was the mortgage and 11 pounds 10 for two years of interest, so that would be considered part of the estate and that was one of the problems in Colonial Virginia that all debts were due— All debts were due when when, um, the person died, so unless you could re-negotiate with the new owners of the debt, then you had to repay it at the time the estate was probated, so poor Nicholas Water had to repay his mortgage. [00:33:51]

Q: And then it says debts due from _____ and—

Rosie: Jay Shelton, yeah. It doesn't have an amount there. I don't know if those were minimal or collected or what, but presumably at some point she might've loaned money or her husband loaned money to those people. [00:34:12]

Q: There were a couple of things that I noticed that seem to be missing in a sense that aren't listed here. There's no cash. There's no coins, anything like that. There's no clothing. Are those—[00:34:25]

Rosie: Okay. A couple of things. On the clothing, there were some goods that the heirs were allowed to remove from the property after the death of the person and so if you notice, um, this— this will or this— this inventory was ordered on June 20th, 1757 and it wasn't actually taken until April 1759 and entered May 21st, 1759, so that's two years and so in that interim, um, the heirs were allowed to take certain goods, personal goods of— of the decedent, of the person who died, um, and so the— the clothes were likely taken away, small— small trinkets, probably jewelry may have been taken as well, um, you know, so certain personal goods could be taken. Um, what else did you say? What else wasn't there? [00:35:27]

Q: There's no, I mean, sort of jewelry, coins.

Rosie: Oh, money. Well, of course, there wasn't very much cash. There wasn't very much currency in Colonial Virginia. The most common— The most common coin was the Spanish piece of 8 and it was very hard to come by gold and silver, by hard money, so most transactions in Colonial Virginia were done by credit and debit, by book— book— bookkeeping, accounting and so people kept ledgers of what was owed to them and what they owed, so there would be very little cash. [00:36:08]

In Virginia, too, you often had promissory notes, um, for tobacco crops, so you might have those kinds of paper, um, that would be part of the estate but it looks like that wasn't part of this particular estate, but cash would be very rare. [00:36:26]

Q: On the first page is this large silver teapot and six silver teaspoons.

Rosie: Uh huh.

Q: At 20 pounds, so that's the most expensive thing on here next to the slaves.

Rosie: Uh huh.

Q: Why might that be so valuable, because it's silver?

Rosie: Because it's silver. Because it's—

Q: Oh, it's also these mugs, it's the things _____ [00:36:49]

Rosie: Yes. Um, because by the mid 18th century tea drinking had become sort of the most popular domestic ritual of choice and there was a lot of imitation of English tea drinking rituals and the wealthier you were, the more likely you were to try and imitate that, so if you could, you would import fancy silver goods, tea— tea kettles, teaspoons, um. It's interesting that they have silver mugs instead of porcelain mugs, but in any case, it indicates that the family was well off enough to import silver and tea drinking really was the center of— of very, um, extensive social ritual at the time, especially the women would gather together and make a big ceremony of brewing a certain kind of tea and pouring the tea and socializing and gossiping and eating little— little teacakes and it was— it was all a big way to both demonstrate your social status and connect with other members of your community, so it was really important by the mid 18th century and, of course, by the time of the American Revolution, drinking tea was so widespread that when Britain put a tax on tea, it was a great cause of alarm and outrage in the colonies and, of course, tea had to be imported from the Far East so it— tea itself was a very exotic good. [00:38:40]

Q: What can we learn, if anything, about the values of Sarah Green, possibly her deceased husband from these specific items?

Rosie: The values— That's interesting, hmmm. Um—

Q: Like you mentioned the, you know, the sort of Biblical reference in the _____.[00:39:07]

Rosie: Yes. What's interesting here is there is this historical picture. It's a really a Biblical picture of Ra— Rachel and Leah I don't see any Bible listed, though, and maybe someone in the family took it, but I would find it interesting if they didn't have a Bible because that was the most common book that people kept in their houses. The fact, though, that there are these other books and a bookcase and a desk suggest a level of literacy and— and interest in learning that was unusual and it's hard to know if that's Sarah Green or her husband but someone in the family was very interested in— in book learning so that's significant I think. [00:39:53]

Um, maps, too, suggest— There're three old maps of the world. That suggests a curiosity about the larger world, an interest in history, in geography that was very

common of— for— for the 18th century Enlightenment period but to have it in Colonial Virginia when society was still pretty rudimentary suggests a deeper interest in learning than most ordinary people would have. [pause] What else? [00:40:31] There's no spinning or weaving equipment listed here, so that suggests to me that she had— she either bought, um, cloth from abroad or maybe some slaves made it and it was in their quarters, but she herself doesn't look like, at least at this point in her life that she did a lot of spinning or weaving. Maybe she did make liquor, though, with her copper still. [00:41:02]

Oh, the other item that— that's interesting here is an old chair and a harness. Again, the fact that it's old is significant and it hasn't been replaced recently, but this would be what you would connect up to a horse and you would ride around in and a woman, in particular, would be interested in having a chair and harness so she wouldn't ride on the horse itself. She could travel from place to place by using that chair and harness, so that's an interesting object in the house and so maybe she traveled around a bit in the countryside. [00:41:37]

Historians have found, though, that in Colonial Virginia, the majority of people in the mid 18th century never left their community for the entire course of their lives. It was rare for a person to travel much farther than within a five-mile radius so the fact that she had a chair and harness does suggest perhaps a curiosity or an ability to go to a larger outside world to— to Williamsburg, maybe, or to other places in— in the colony. [00:42:14]

Q: Would a chair and harness be like apart or—

Rosie: Hmm—

Q: Something—

Rosie: A raised— A raised seat, I think, and you know, and then that would connect to the horse, you know, with wheels and—

Q: Is there anything— You sort of touched on this, but is there anything that really jumps out at you as unusual this time or remarkable? [00:42:41]

Rosie: Remarkable— shsss shsss— No, I think I've mentioned the stuff that was interesting to me. I mean, there are— [00:43:08] She does have a lot of the typical stuff in a— in a kitchen, but I would imagine that because she had female slaves she didn't use the washing tubs herself. She didn't use the, um, pails herself. She didn't necessarily use the pestle and mortar herself. She might supervise the slaves in making the food, in washing the clothes and, um, making the liquor, frying whatever had to be fried, um, cooking whatever needed to be cooked. I— I— I bet she was not heavily involved in those daily kinds of activities because she had a lot of help. [00:43:50]

Q: Switching for a moment to sort of the context, the broader picture a little bit, how does this probate record fit into a larger context and what other kinds of knowledge are you using? I mean you're bringing in things that you know in a sense versus what someone could tell from actually reading this specific probate record. Does that make sense? [00:44:14]

Rosie: Yes, that's true. Um, but I think even someone without a lot of background knowledge could make some headway with a document like this and I think, first of all, you look at the relative values of the items and you look at, um, the kinds of materials that they're made of and you look at where they're placed in the house and I think that those kinds of— those pieces of information give you a place to start in determining, you know, what— what's going on in this document. [00:44:56] Of course, there're a lot of history books— by historians that I've read that help me figure this out, but the other thing is there is one reference book that I think most teachers would have access to that could be very useful when you look at a probate record and that's the *Oxford English Dictionary*, so, for example, there were some items here that I didn't know what they referred to and the *Oxford English Dictionary* which is available online through reference lib— libraries but it also available in a multi-volume format and gives the historical evolution of words throughout time is really useful here, so I saw under— in the chamber, which is obviously a bedroom, one bed teaster, so I thought what is that, a teaster, so I went to the *OED* and it was actually listed under tester, but the alternative spelling was teaster, t-e-a-s-t-e-r, and what it is is a canopy over a bed frame, so she had a canopy bed and I found that just by looking in the *Oxford English Dictionary* or there was a cotton counterpane and I looked that up and that's the outer covering of a bed. It's like a quilt, but obviously it's a very specific kind of quilt because they talk about a silk patchwork quilt and they also talk about a cotton counterpane, so I think with just a minimal amount of effort a person without of a lot knowledge of the 18th century can find out what some of these specific items refer to. [00:46:46]

Back to the pictures, um, if you have some Biblical knowledge, um, there's this historical picture of Rachel and Leah and that obviously refers to the Old Testament Rachel and Leah, um, the daughters that, um, were married off to Jacob and, you know, a lot of people would know that just because of their religious background. There's this other reference to Solomon's Temple, um, that's a picture I guess of Solomon's Temple and those two right there tell you that they were religious or that they wanted religious images around them, so a lot of these things are not that difficult to figure out. [00:47:33]

Um, some of the things you just have to— to know, but things like the better materials then are the better materials now, like mahogany or silk or silver, so those things aren't hard to figure out either, so, yeah, I bring other kinds of knowledge to it, but there are a lot of things that you can figure out just by— by looking at it. [00:48:04]

Q: How do you know that a chamber is a bedroom?

Rosie: Um, because there're beds in it [laughs].

Q: Just really from looking at it?

Rosie: Yes. And also there's the chamber and the upper chamber and in a lot of these houses you had like a loft and that's where people slept and the loft is also, um, a room where they— they keep bed-related materials, so— so, you know, process of deduction. [00:48:40]

Q: What other kind of sources did you use to try and if you wanted to do, sort of understand this particular probate record or probate records of this period in more detail? Where else would you go to do research? [00:48:53]

Rosie: Like names of books or historians or—

Q: Different kinds of sources, so like you mentioned wills, you might look at, you know, other probate records in the same probate book.

Rosie: Well, I think it's important to understand the laws at the time and the legal Code of Virginia is available online and if you wanted to look up old laws I think it's important and interesting to know what the— the laws were regarding inheritance, um. There are a lot of historians who write specifically about this, but what other kinds of primary sources would you want to go to. Maps— Maps of the county, um, if the county courthouse still exists, it might be interesting to visit the county courthouse. There are a lot of county court records available I know on microfilm and some of them probably are going to be available online, but a lot of county court records, um—[00:50:13]

Q: What kinds of records would you look up to learn about Sarah Green?

Rosie: Um, well besides the will? Deeds.

Q: Why don't you start saying you could look at her will?

Rosie: Okay. All right. What else could you find out about Sarah Green? You could look at and see if there is a will for Sarah Green. You could look up and see if there're any other Greens in York County for the period in a 50 to 60 to 70 years before that. I would go backward in time from the date of her death from 1757 and try to go backward to see when her husband died and see what his will said, if he had one. [00:50:51] Um, deeds would be what they owned in terms of land and so a lot of deed books exist from this time and so you could look up what land they owned. Um, a lot of the county courts have other kinds of records like depositions and court suits and you can look up and see if there're any legal suits involving Sarah Green or any other people whose last name is Green and it's hard to determine for sure if all the Greens are the same family, but a lot of times just by reading those records you can figure out if they're related because in the course of describing the lawsuit, they have to say who they're related to and what family they're part of, so I think the first thing would be to try and figure out what her husband's name was and then I'd try to figure out if she had other family members, children, um, or brothers or, sis— you know, sisters. [00:51:51]

The problem with women is that because they have a maiden name, getting to their maiden name is the hard part and there aren't usually good marriage records for a lot of parts of Colonial Virginia. Particular parishes might have them, but that's really hit and miss and they're not— They weren't kept by the state at that time, so one of the problems in dealing with women in these records of the past is that you often don't have their maiden name, so you're really tied to understanding them through their husbands. [00:52:25]

Q: Sorry, when you move your leg like that it shakes the cord and _____.

Rosie: Oh, okay, sorry.

Q: Were these ever contested? I mean, what if—

Rosie: Oh, sure.

Q: More than one kid— Is there a chance that there would court records of that or if she was murdered or—[00:52:42]

Rosie: Oh, yeah, absolutely. Yes. Um, if there was any question about how she died, there would be an inquest. There could be court proceedings, criminal proceedings, so there could be related records in that way. Um, contesting wills was very common, so after 1759, after this— this inventory was submitted and the will was probated, if there was a will and I'm assu— assuming there is, um, then other creditors might come forward, other heirs might come forward, so there could be a legal trail subsequent to this inventory and a lot of those records are available on microfilm and, you know, once you have a person, a name, it's often easier to trace what happens before and after. [00:53:35]

Q: Are the amounts ever contested? You know, I think that the desks and bookcases are worth 6 pounds, not 5 pounds?

Rosie: I don't know that for sure. I would be surprised. I think the— the biggest contestations are whether you were owed money, whether you were an heir, whether you— you, um, borrowed money, that sort of thing. I— I think the particular amounts, unless it was something of great value, you know, slaves might— Yeah, might say, well, you know, this is— this is a slave that, um, has great experience in the cultivation of tobacco and so he should really be valued at 70 pounds instead of 50, but I would be surprised if there was much dispute about the smaller items. [00:54:28]

Q: What would happen if there were no heirs and there was money left after the creditors were _____?

Rosie: That's a good question. I mean, I— I think there would— There's just a legal chain of relations that, you know, the law prescribes sisters, cousins, and somebody would get it but I think in the— the last resort, it would go to the state. [00:54:53]

Q: Is there any tax on inheritance?

Rosie: At this time not that I know of. No, that I know of, uh huh. No, the taxes were usually on— on goods and particularly, land. [00:55:11]

Q: Turning for a moment to the classroom, you've talked— I think you've sort of answered this. What would you want a student to notice?

Rosie: Uh huh.

Q: What questions might you want a student to ask in looking at this and sort of a related question, how might a teacher introduce this or what questions might a teacher pose in bringing this to the classroom, this particular document? [00:55:37]

Rosie: [coughs] Um, I mean, one of the most difficult issues I think is how much money is this, you know, is this a lot of money, is this a little money and if you notice in the last paragraph, it says pursuant to an order of your county dated 20th Ja— June 1757 the subscribers having been first sworn before a Justice of the Peace have appraised in current money the slaves and personal estate of Sarah Green, so current money means, um, as money is currently valued in Virginia, but what's the relationship between Virginia, the valuation in Virginia money and, you know, the value of money in England per se. That's hard to determine. [00:56:38]

A lot of this stuff you could only determine relatively, that is, by looking at other wills and inventories or of reading a secondary source that tells you a wealthy person has an estate worth this much, a poor person this much, but again, taking internal clues in the document I think you can get evidence that this person was well off, um, and I think the relative valuations are important and I think one of the things a teacher can say is, well, look at how much a slave is valued at compared with, um, compared with, let's say, you know, um, a desk and bookcase, all right, [00:57:25]so even— even the cheapest slave is worth 30 pounds and the desk and book— bookcase are worth 5 pounds, so that tells us that that's probably very valuable or take something that looks more valuable, um, the silver teapot is worth 20 pounds. That's the most valuable item on this inventory besides the slaves and that's still worth less than any of the individual slaves, so that just shows you something about how valuable slaves were, how central they were to the economy and to the production of wealth in the Virginia economy and I think it's those relative values that tell you a lot, um, as you say, what's there and what's missing can tell you something important.

Q: Could we stop while I change the tape? [00:58:30]

[BEGIN CD #2]

Rosie: Okay. Well, I think this is a really interesting inventory because I felt like I had— I could get a sense of who this person was and it seems to me that Sarah Greene

was a widow, an old widow, and that might mean 60 years old at this time, but a widow whose husband had died many years before, whose husband had been very successful, probably as a planter and here she was living into her old age with all these signs of her former wealth around her, [00:00:40] her ivory knives and forks, her china cups, her silk quilt, her damask napkins, mahogany tea boards, um, old books, leather chairs, all of these signs of wealth but she was too poor to buy much new and so she was sort of living off her inherited wealth from her husband. She was probably scrimping by, probably on the interest from Nicholas Water— Wal— Water's mortgage, the 11 pounds per year.[00:01:17]

Um, she had these slaves and it's [really] important to remember that, you know, the slaves' reproduction created new wealth for her and she could, if push came to shove, sell one of these slaves if she really needed money, so as long as she had those slaves, she would never be penniless, but she probably didn't have a lot of extra money in her later life and just scrimped by and enjoyed, you know, the— the sort of, um, ratty wealth that was [laugh] that we speak of the tattered wealth, the signs of wealth from her— her previous life, her glass gilt frame and looking glass and it just— it's— it's a kind of sad image, but it's a vivid image and sometimes that doesn't come through with these inventories.

You can't imagine really what kind of person lived in this house or what their daily life was like and with this inventory, I get this stronger image, [00:02:28] so she was probably very proud of her— her former possessions and of her former wealth and still enjoying it, but not much able to move beyond that.

Q: Is there anything— You started to say when we changed the tape about what you can read that's here and also what might be missing. Is there anything that you might have expected to see that you don't see? [00:02:54]

Rosie: Well, I— I did expect to see more in terms of, you know, spinning equipment or weaving equipment, um, you know, typical woman's work kind of things, but she had slaves or making, you know, dairy, um, making butter or cheese. I don't see any of that and maybe it's a sign of her age. [00:03:18] Maybe she's too old to do that stuff, but I think the fact that she has slaves and they do it or maybe she bought it, I mean, maybe she just, you know, she had enough income and had her slaves hired out to— to nearby farmers and just bought those things that she needed, but I don't see very much of those kinds of basic woman's work equipment there. [00:03:45]

Q: I was going to ask you that as well. What might the slaves have been doing since we don't see farm equipment or tobacco equipment or cattle or—

Rosie: I would bet she hired them out. I would bet she hired them out as labor to nearby farmers. If they were skilled, you know, they could definitely work for someone else, but even so, just as laborer or a domestic.

Q: Could you say that again? I'm sorry and say I would bet that she hired the slaves out.

Rosie: Oh, okay. I imagine that she hired the slaves out to nearby farmers. She probably hired the— the women out as domestics, um, and that she lived off the income from what— what she was paid for this labor because labor continued to be in short supply in Colonial Virginia and so if she didn't have land of her own for them to farm, then she would just profit from their labor by hiring them out to a neighbor.[00:04:48]
[laughs]

Q: _____

Rosie: [00:05:04] Well, what's important for teachers to know about the inventories is that it's more to get a sense of the people's daily lives and not to worry about understanding each particular item on there, and I think that when a non-expert looks at these, you can easily get freaked out because there's so many— so many items on there that are unfamiliar, but I think you just have to try and work with what you have and, as I say, use the *Oxford English Dictionary* appropriately, but go with what you know and then see if what you expect is— is true, that is, that, well, we know silk is— is a expensive good today. Does it look relatively expensive then? Is damask an expensive good then? [00:06:01]

Um, now, there's cer— There's some things that are not going to be true today that were true then, but I think it's important to start with what you know and ask is this a continuity or is there change and work within the document and don't worry about all the things that you don't know because there's just going to be a— a lot of stuff that you don't know, so it's the organization of the—the inventory. [00:06:30] It— By rooms. It's the relative value that's important. It's what's there. It's what's not. It's wh— What it tells you about what the person's interested in, um, what the person does for a living, where their wealth comes from, so I— I just would urge— urge readers of these documents not to be intimidated because it— it is intimidating when you first look at them if you just look at all the things you don't— don't know. [00:06:57]