

Search Tips

The *Probing the Past* database provides a searchable version of information contained in the transcriptions of all 325 probate inventories. Entering a word into Quick Search will yield a list of all inventories containing that specific word. For example, “Memoirs” will list all inventories that contain the word “memoirs.” Single word searches may be expanded by using an asterisk as a wild card “*” after the word. For example: “book” will return only those estates where book is found. Searching for “book*” will return those inventories where book, books, bookcase, booklet, etc. are found.

To locate your search term in the inventory, download the transcribed PDF and use your PDF-viewer search capabilities.

In addition, general information about the estate and item locations in the inventory have been identified to permit searches for general information. Refine searches by choosing a specific colony/state, city/county, male or female-held estate, estate with or without slaves, and rural or non-rural estate. The date range can also be specified

General Terms

Appraiser: The court-appointed individual who examined, recorded, and in most cases, valued the estate of the deceased. It was usual for two or three appraisers to list the moveable contents of the deceased’s estate, in most cases, set a monetary value and then sign the document and return it to the county court. The value of an item was based on its condition and projected market value. Once the inventory became part of the county records, it was an integral part of the estate settlement process. For a thorough discussion of the probate document process, see: Alice Hanson Jones, *American Colonial Wealth: Documents and Methods* (New York: Arno Press, 1977) 3-24.

Inventory: A legal document listing all moveable property of a deceased individual recorded by court appointed appraisers. Moveable property consists of household goods, slaves, indentured servants, livestock, investments (not real estate), and in some cases, debt due to the deceased. Upon completion the inventory was returned to the county court and entered into probate records.

The 325 inventories included in this database have been selected to meet specific criteria: they either reflect individual or similar economic status to the owner of Gunston Hall, George Mason, or are inventories with lists of books, detailed descriptors, or recorded room-by-room, with at least one separate space in the house listed. These inventories represent less than five percent of all inventories recorded between 1750 and 1810 in the counties that were thoroughly examined: Fairfax, Prince William, and Stafford in Virginia, and Charles and Prince Georges in Maryland.

Probate: The legal process of settling the estate of a deceased person, specifically for resolving all claims and distributing the decedent's property. The principle reason for probate was to insure

that all claim's on the deceased's property were satisfied. Secondly, the reason was to assign the heirs their proper share of the estate.

Quarters: A specific location, defined as “quarter, ” or “plantation” listed in the probate inventory, generally designating places where enslaved people lived.

Rural: An inventory that shows the presence of agricultural tools and livestock. Inventories that contain very few, if any, agricultural tools or a small amount of livestock are considered urban. Many urban inventories contain a cow or two for family use.

Slaves: Enslaved people are listed, usually by name, sometimes by occupation in the probate inventory. In most cases they are listed with their monetary value. Any information on the names, genders, ages, and occupations of individual slaves, and the monetary values assigned by the appraisers, is in the complete inventory transcription.

Transcriptions: The typescript of the microfilmed court recorded probate inventory. Only microfilm copies have been examined—the original document was not consulted. All transcriptions in the collection list complete citations for the source of the original record. Although every effort has been made to make the transcriptions as complete and true as possible, it is suggested that the attached facsimile of the original be examined to preclude differences in interpretation. Page or folio numbers and notes by the transcriber have been added in italics.

Types of Objects [Download "Search Terms" for specific search suggestions]

Art: Category including: drawings, engraving, frame, heads, images, likenesses, maps, miscellaneous, paintings, pictures, portraits, prints, profiles, and sculptural.

Beverage: Category including: alcohol, chocolate, coffee, general, miscellaneous, serving, storage, and tea.

Clothing: All wearing apparel recorded in inventories. It contains the sub-categories: accessories, body, feet, hand, and head.

Food Preparation: Category including: cooking, measure, miscellaneous, processing, storage, and utensils.

Food Service: Category including: breakfast, condiments, cutlery, dessert, dishes, miscellaneous, serving, and storage.

Furniture: Category including: desk, hygiene, looking glasses, miscellaneous, recreation, seating, sleeping, storage, tables, and time keeping.

Heating: Category including: andirons, fenders, miscellaneous, stoves, and tools.

Household Decor: Category including: miscellaneous, ornament, paint, wall cover, and window.

Household Stores: Category including: beverage, food, hardware, heating, hygiene, laundry, lighting, miscellaneous, paint, textiles and writing. This Category includes items that appear to be stored supplies. For example: 3 canisters bohea tea, 146 gals. cider, or 3 quires writing paper.

Household Utensils: Category including: cleaning, dairy, fire fighting, garden, hygiene, laundry, miscellaneous, and storage.

Instruments: Category including: measure, miscellaneous, optical, scientific, survey, and time keeping.

Lighting: Category including: candle, lamp, lantern, sconces, and snuffers

Personal: Category including: aids, hair, hygiene, jewelry, medicine, miscellaneous, money, recreation, religious, time keeping, tobacco, and writing.

Recreation: Category including: games, miscellaneous, and musical instruments.

Textiles: Category including: bed linens, bed over (meaning bed coverings placed over the bed lines, for example: sheets, blankets, quilts), bed upholstery, bedding (all of the items under the sheets), fibers, floor, hygiene, miscellaneous, production, stores, table, upholstery, and window. Note: Inventory appraisers would at times use the term "bed" for furniture and at times for a stuffed item that would be referred to as a mattress in current language. Conversely, the term furniture might apply to those textiles on the bedstead.

Travel: Category including: boats, miscellaneous, tack, and vehicles.

Ware: Category including those items listed in inventories as "ware" with no specific information as to the type of object: ceramics, glass, metal, pewter, silver, and wood. For example: a parcel of earthen ware or 2 ozs. 16 dwt. old silver.

Weapons: Category including: edge, fire, and miscellaneous.