

## FINDING PLACES

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In *A COLONIAL RECORD ODYSSEY*, I related some aspects of my search for a wandering Huguenot-Quaker immigrant of the 1680s.

I had back-tracked him from New Jersey to Pennsylvania to Virginia. In Henrico County, Virginia, from which he had fled abruptly, apparently to avoid paying a debt, he created a court document saying he was then of Summerton “to the south.”

A United States gazetteer identified Summerton as being in Clarendon County, South Carolina. A map showed it to be on the *north* side of the Santee River. As I continued my odyssey through colonial records, I located early Huguenot settlements, but on the *south* side of the Santee.

During this research phase I relied on four publications concerning place names. Each one provided a different type of information; each one told me of different possibilities for Summerton. I realized how often we rely solely on maps and ignore other place-name aids.

There are many kinds of place-name finding aids. Those we are most apt to find useful are cartographic databases, gazetteers, postal guides, and place-name studies.

Because we are dealing in the past, we may be seeking names that are no longer in use, either because the name has been changed or the place has been abandoned. Thus, modern cartographic databases may fail us, but old gazetteers and postal guides may be helpful. Even more helpful are place-name studies or publications on historical place names.

Many of these publications are out of print and were never acquired by genealogical libraries; your local college library is more likely to have them. If they are in your library, they may not be in the genealogical collection. If you cannot find what you need in the library catalog, ask a librarian to point you in the right direction.

You may need to look further afield by identifying a title of interest and then requesting it through Interlibrary Loan. Begin your search with “Geographic Tools” by Carol Mehr Schiffman in *Ancestry’s Printed Sources*. It includes a state-by-state listing of gazetteers and postal guides. *Ancestry’s Red Book* lists gazetteers for each state.

The Family History Library Catalog has over 600 works with “gazetteer” in the title; a keyword search produced well over 2000 hits. Many of these references, however, are not true gazetteers and may neglect place-name studies. The best technique is to look under “Gazetteers” and “Names, Geographical” for the state. In this way, I found a dozen titles for Virginia and West Virginia.

(Hint: It is often difficult to figure out what subject categories a library uses, so I like to begin with a title I know and see how that is categorized. For online catalogs, you can click on the subject to see all items for that sub-

ject. I usually end up with several subject categories for any single library.)

I realized that Summerton may have been spelled Somerton (see *IT’S AN AUDIO WORLD*).

Sure enough, in researching early Huguenots in South Carolina, I learned that Somerton plantation, on the *south* side of the Santee, had been in the possession of a Huguenot family. I was thrilled—until I consulted a place-name study on South Carolina and learned that the name hadn’t been applied to the plantation until well after the reference I was following. (I even researched it myself to be sure the book was correct. It was.) This points out an important aspect of branching beyond simple maps and gazetteers. Usually only localized studies get down to such a detailed level, providing very local names such as names of plantations and information about the first use and origin of the name.

In my search for the wandering immigrant, I finally concluded that Summerton in Clarendon County was too far up the Santee River for such early settlement. I had such good luck (or bad luck, depending on your perspective) with the place-name book, that I tried again with a Virginia place-name book. It listed a place called Somerton, a creek called Somerton, and a Friends Meeting House called Somerton, all in Nansemond County. Bingo! I recognized the Quaker meeting as Chuckatuck, organized in 1672. This area is southeast of Henrico, near the Dismal Swamp and the current North Carolina border. A North Carolina gazetteer informed me that Somerton Creek rises in Virginia and flows into Gates County, North Carolina, where it enters Chowan River. A likely place for the immigrant. I just wish he hadn’t chosen one of the most severely burned counties in Virginia.

I hope that in the future you will consult gazetteers and place-name studies in your research. I recognize that you may not live near a library with resources on your area of interest, so I’ve included some online suggestions to get you started—but don’t neglect published works that are apt to tell you so much more.

### ONLINE RESOURCES: GAZETTEERS

There are several historical gazetteers as part of the *Ancestry.com* databases. [Others may be found as more recent online sources.]

### ONLINE RESOURCES: CARTOGRAPHIC DATABASES

The most notable online resource for place names is the Geographic Names Information System (GNIS). Begin your search at the home page and learn more about it before jumping into a search.

For this article, I tried the Summerton search. It listed a “populated place” Summerton in Michigan and eight places in Clarendon County, South Carolina, including a populated place, three churches, two schools, one lookout

tower, and a waste treatment pond. Because I had selected "Query Variant Name," it also listed one populated place, Somerton, in Suffolk City, Virginia.

The latter listing shows one of the problems of using modern resources. I only recognized it as being the place in Nansemond County because it indicates it is on the Gates USGS Quadrangle map. For governmental reasons, several of Virginia's counties have become cities, and Suffolk City on modern maps is equivalent to historical Nansemond County.

Spend some time playing with the searches. For example, I was miffed that it hadn't told me about Somerton Creek or Meeting House, even though I had left the "Feature Type" field blank. So I reversed the search and entered Somerton. This time I got 24 hits, including the meeting house in Suffolk City and two references to the Creek in Gates County, North Carolina. (In other words, the variants only include political entities.) The GNIS database is linked to USGS Quadrangle maps.