

# Finnish Ethnicity in the State of Virginia

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## Abstract

The history of Finns in the state of Virginia dates well into the past, during which Finns have always been a very small minority of the state's ethnic groups. Since 1970, a change of US Census questions regarding ancestry shows a change in ethnic concentration and an emergence of this ethnicity. Using maps and graphs, the distribution of Finns within the state shows that prior to 1980, Finns tended to cluster in the north-eastern and south-eastern counties of the state, with very little concentration in other counties. Over the past two decades, a stronger presence of Finns is encountered throughout the state. A representative survey of 120 Finns across the state conducted in the winter of 1997–98 indicates that over 75% of the respondents had, indeed, moved to the state after 1970. Reasons for this increase are correlated with employment opportunities with the federal government around Washington DC and with opportunities in the Armed Forces. The

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paper presents a look at the known history and present conditions of a small, but emerging ethnic population within the state.

## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to shed some light on a minority ethnic group whose concentration in the state of Virginia has historically been low and not well recognized. As one of the earliest states with a Finnish population, the history of the Finns within the state has been overshadowed by the migration of Finns to the Midwestern states. With statistical data, an attempt is made to describe the historical settlement patterns of the Finnish ethnic group within the state, and using additional sources gained from a state-wide survey and interviews, some additional observations can be made in terms of the recent past and present condition of the vitality of this ethnic community.

## Early history

Since both Finns and Swedes settled the Delaware Valley beginning in 1638 and founded the New Sweden Colony, it would seem probable that some of these

early settlers may have found their way to Virginia. Indeed, some of the names of early settlers such as the surname of Peter Rambo are encountered in some Virginia locations. A total of some 500–600 Finns are believed to have settled in the New Sweden Colony. However, historians and geographers who have studied these original Finnish settlers have not indicated any ties to possible Virginia Finns (Wuorinen, 1938; Åberg, 1987; Jordan & Kaups, 1989; Hofstra, 1993).

Traditionally, Finns have settled in the more northern states. Some of the early Finns arrived in the US during the mid 1800s, and the earliest settlements include areas such as Fitchburg, Massachusetts, the Copper Country in Upper Michigan and the Mesabi Ranges in Minnesota. Generally, Finns have preferred to locate in the Midwest, and today the largest concentration of Finns is found in the states of Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan.

In terms of early Finnish settlers in Virginia, records of participants in the Civil War have shown no possible Finnish individuals from the state – although a few have been discovered from other states such as Texas and



Louisiana (Hewett,1995; Roinila,1998). Although little information is available on the early Finns, bits and pieces of evidence exist, including a photo of some Finns found in Virginia (most likely from the DC area) in a text by Salomon Ilmonen (1919). Most important, the US Census counts have been able to provide a good idea of the early presence of members of this ethnic group. Accordingly, as early as the 1900 Census, a total of 36 Finnish-born individuals were resident in the state. The number of Finnish-born immigrants appears to peak in 1920, but their relative numbers have remained low. (Table 1).

A comparative examination of early distribution shows that small, but definite clustering of Finns occurred especially in the areas of Norfolk (1920), and near

Washington DC (1940) (See maps 1 & 2). Causes for the strong clustering in 1920 in the Southeast are possibly tied to the merchant marine and the U.S. Navy, which employed many Finns as sailors in the late 1800s and early 1900s. In response to the Great Depression and the oncoming Second World War, many of these Norfolk Finns may have moved away from the area to find employment and a better life, or participation in the war effort – either with the United States or perhaps Finland. Others may have not claimed a Finnish ancestry for the census. This may have been a result of the difficulties encountered by many Finns who dealt with many socialist causes in the United States during this period.

A more recent distribution map of the Finns and Finnish-Ameri-

**Table 1. Finnish Ethnicity In Virginia (From Census Records, 1900–1990)**

Census	
Year	Number (determined by)
1900	36 (born in Finland)
1910	Data not collected
1920	240 (born in Finland)
1930	68 (born in Finland)
1940	73 (born in Finland)
1950	159 (born in Finland)
1960	108 (born in Finland)
1970	187 (born in Finland)
1980	4873 (all or part Finnish)
1990	6770 (single & multiple origin)

Source: U.S. Census, 1900–1990

cans of the state shows that a concentration has developed in essentially two areas. First is the heavily populated Washington DC suburban area, followed by Virginia Beach in the south-eastern corner of the state. These two

regions have the most Finns and Finnish-Americans according to the 1990 Census. Reasons for these two concentrations may reflect the attraction of government and military employment opportunities. Somewhat smaller clusters appear in three other locations – around Richmond, Roanoke and Charlottesville. The first and most obvious similarity here is the fact that all three have prominent universities.

In terms of the proportion of Finns within the state, only 6770 Finns (4507 first ancestry reported plus 2263 second ancestry reported) were residents of the state (1990 Census). This represents only a mere 0.1% of the state population, and in itself presents a scattered population (see maps 3 & 4).

### Survey methodology

To find the Finns of the state, the phone directories and Internet White Pages for the state were used to locate the names and addresses of as many Finns as possible. Since Finnish surnames are very distinctive, the author was able to look for distinct Finnish surnames, which created a database of 230 individuals from across the state. It must be noted that one disadvantage with using names found in the phonebook is that a sampling bias favours male respondents whose names are usually found in the directories.

From a list of 230 names, a survey population of regionally representative residents was chosen. Regional representation of the state's Finnish population was possible by dividing the addresses according to a three-part distri-

bution pattern. A total of some 60% of the mail-in questionnaires were sent to the northern part of the state, 30% to the east, and 10% to the west. The boundaries of this arbitrary division of three regions were chosen according to the 1990 Census that showed certain counties within the state as having no Finns as residents. These non-settled counties became the boundaries that were used to separate larger regions in the three areas inside which Finnish ethnicity was encountered by the Census and by the internet address search. In order to avoid sampling bias, this method helped establish a representative sample of Finns in the state.

From the sublists of names established for the three regions, I chose roughly every second name and sent questionnaires with self-stamped return envelopes to prospective respondents through the winter months of 1997. A total of 122 mail-in questionnaires were sent across the state, asking eleven basic questions dealing with origins, reasons for moving to Virginia, occupations, ethnic self-identity, and decade of immigration to the state. A total of 63 responses were received from a total of 122 questionnaires sent. A total of 19 questionnaires were returned because the address was incomplete or because the person had moved away, and represent a total of 15% of all questionnaires that were unusable. Discounting these returned questionnaires, 63 valid questionnaires remain from a possible maximum population in the survey of 103 respondents who were reached by mail. Thus the response rate is 61%.

The second part of collecting data was to interview some of the individuals who returned the questionnaires. The last question on the questionnaire asked for individuals willing to respond with their names and addresses for the purpose of a follow-up interview visit. All respondents were assured anonymity in the entire research project, unless they indicated otherwise. Follow-up visits were made to a total of eleven individuals during the spring of 1998, and included residents in Arlington, Chesapeake, Fairfax, Virginia Beach, and Waynesboro.

### Results

The results can be divided into seven areas of interest, which enable us to understand some of the trends and characteristics of the Finnish people in Virginia.

#### *1. Year/Decade of arrival*

While I claim that a large number of Finns have appeared in Virginia since the 1970s, it would be inaccurate to propose that the increase is only noted as a result of more rigorous Census counts. Prior to the 1980 addition and change in the census ancestry questions, there undoubtedly were many descendants of Finns who may have lived in Virginia. My argument for a post-1970s growth, however, is supported by the findings below.

Of the 63 individuals who responded to the questionnaires, the majority had arrived in the state within the previous three decades (over 75% have come to the state since 1970). Only a few individuals have arrived earlier, the earli-

est being 1947. Although the 1920–1940 census counts indicate that Finns were in the state, no contact was made with residents who may have been in the state prior to the 1940s (Table 2).

**Table 2. Immigration of survey respondents to Virginia**

Decade	Number	Percentage (%)
1940s	2	3.2
1950s	5	7.9
1960s	3	4.8
1970s	14	22.2
1980s	22	34.9
1990s	13	20.6
No response	4	6.3
Total	63	100

### 2. Origin of Virginia Finns

An overwhelming majority of the Finns have roots in other US states, led by Michigan (16%) and Illinois (10%), followed by Massachusetts, Minnesota, and California with 6% each. Other origins included the states of Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Louisiana, Maryland, North Carolina, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Texas, Washington, and Wisconsin. Direct arrivals from Finland include only 3 individuals, who moved to Virginia because of education and eventual marriage to an American spouse.

### 3. Demographics

In terms of demographics, it should be noted immediately that the men dominated the sample. A total of 48 men (76%) and 15 women (24%) responded to the questionnaires. The respondents were generally in their late 40s to

mid 50s, with the average age being 50 years. The youngest respondent was born in 1974 (23 years old) and the oldest was born in 1908 (90 years of age).

### 4. Reasons for immigrating to Virginia

As with other ethnic groups who immigrate, economic reasons involving work were the most commonly cited reason. This was also true among the Finns in Virginia (51%). A second major reason was the involvement of many Finns (either parents or respondents themselves) in the US military forces (27%). A smaller percentage moved to the state due to personal reasons such as marriage and family ties (11%). Education and retirement were encountered among 5 individuals (8%).

### 5. Occupations (Past or present)

It is immediately noted that there is, similar to the reasons for moving to Virginia, a tie to the US military. Some of the interviewees and respondents included a Chief Petty Officer on the Aircraft Carrier USS Eisenhower, and a retired colonel who fought in WWII, who was instrumental in the release of POWs in the Philippines and furnished the honour guard for General Douglas MacArthur upon the surrender of the Japanese on board the Battleship USS Missouri in Tokyo harbour (Peltonen 1998; Lahti 1994, 1998). Needless to say, there appear many who have worked and still work for the military. This includes the Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps. The military claims 10 past and present respondent occupations, while many others noted that the



Colonel Edward H. Lahti, 511th Parachute Infantry Regiment. – *Photo courtesy of Col. Lahti, "Memoirs of an Angel", 1994.*

military was the reason for their parents' relocation to the state. Thus, the difference in the 27% who originally moved to Virginia due to the military services of parents or other family members, while 17% have retired from the military or who are actively involved in it.

The tertiary service sector dominates in terms of economic activities (94.7%), with only one individual who used to be a fisherman and only two respondents working in the secondary – manufacturing sector. Along with the military, there were many engineers, health professionals including nurses, teachers, computer programmers and specialists. Based on occupations held by the Finns of Virginia, it may be inferred that a higher level of education and income would follow suit.

### 6. Ethnic self-identity

The Virginia Finns choose to identify themselves mostly as

American (43%), followed by the hyphenated Finnish-American term (35%). A total of 14% indicated that they were Finnish, and some 8% declared some "other" identity. Respondents in this category mentioned triple hyphenated identities such as American-Finnish-Irish or Swedish-Finnish-English (Table 3). Based on interviews and conversations with respondents, this Americanization is partly the result of the domination of second- and third-generation respondents, along with few fourth-generation respondents. Unfortunately, a question of generation was not asked in the survey.

**Table 3. Ethnic self-identity of Virginia Finns**

Identity	Number	Percentage (%)
Finnish	9	14.3
Finnish-American	22	34.9
American	27	42.9
"Other"	5	7.9
Total	63	100

### **Finnish cultural organizations and associations**

Only a handful of clubs and organizations are available to the Finnish ethnic community. These include religious, social, and fraternal organizations. The only areas within Virginia where any activity was encountered were the Washington DC area and the Virginia Beach area. In the Washington DC area there is the Embassy of Finland which organizes a

number of events over the year in which many of the more active Virginia Finns participate. Some examples of events include the midsummer celebration on June 21, the Finnish Independence Day celebration on December 10 every year, and a number of other traditional festival dates in the spring and fall. The Finnish embassy also provides a Finnish language school for the children of the embassy staff. These classes are limited to the embassy personnel only, since the children need to follow the Finnish curriculum of studies and to keep their education on par with Finland (Christiansen, 1998).

Aside from the embassy language class which is not open to the public, there is the Finnish Language School Association (FLSA) of Arlington, which was founded in 1979. Operated by volunteers who have an interest in teaching the language, the school originally provided Finnish language classes for children and adults. More recently lessons have been provided for adults only. Classes are held every Saturday in the fall and spring terms at the Resurrection Lutheran Church in Arlington. In 1997, a total of three teachers taught 26 students in beginner, intermediate and advanced classes. In the spring of 1998, the school organized an annual "immersion weekend", during which many of the participants learned how to make Finnish foods such as pulla (coffee-bread) and speak Finnish throughout the weekend. These immersion weekends have been very popular, and have occurred annually since 1995 (Christiansen, 1998).

Another organization is the Finlandia Foundation National Chapter. This organization is a nationwide club which has local chapters in many areas. The National Chapter was founded in 1960 by Rear Admiral Onni Lattu at the request of Consul Paloheimo, founder of the National Finlandia Foundation, Inc. Over the years, many Finns have become part of this organization. In 1998, there were some 250 names listed in the membership rolls, which involved many couples and families, bringing the membership close to 500 individuals. Virginians form a large proportion of this membership (Snyder, 1998). The Finlandia Foundation has a national newsletter as well as a local bulletin which informs the membership of activities and events coming up, along with news about the national organization, scholarships and awards which they grant to other organizations and individuals (Kolstrom, 1998). Major events are the Kalevala Fest, and special programs, which frequently take place at the Finnish Embassy. These have focused on current political, cultural, and economic happenings in Finland. In the winter of 1997-98 the National Chapter also arranged a meeting at the National Archives featuring speakers on the topic of genealogical research (Snyder, 1998).

The Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church comes to visit the DC area to conduct services, with a full-time Finnish pastor from New York City being in charge. Meetings are held once a month at the Advent Lutheran Church in Arlington, VA (Mäkelä, 1998).

The Finnish Lutheran Church originally was founded in Washington DC as early as 1942 and appeared active at the start. Positive reports were written in the *Kirkollinen Kalenteri* (Church Calendar) in 1944 (Joki, 1944). Unfortunately, the congregation apparently was discontinued at some point, and more recently the Finns have only re-established the visiting Lutheran Pastor and monthly meetings (Mäkelä, 1998). Special services, such as the Easter service of 1998, attract up to 40 to 50 individuals to the services.

Finally, there is an organization called the Finn Spark, Inc., (Kipinä Kerho) which was founded in 1949 by a resident Finnish-American. Established originally as a women's club, it has expanded to accept men as members as well. The purpose of the club is to maintain the Finnish language among its members and encourage Finnish culture and traditions to make Finland better known in America. In 1998, the membership included 120 individuals, holding monthly meetings in various members' homes in the DC area. A newsletter is published, and events are organized such as picnics, bazaars and bake sales (Wilson, 1998).

The only other area in Virginia where any Finnish cultural organizations exist is in Virginia Beach. This area has the Finlandia Foundation Tidewater Chapter, which meets every month at a Ruritan Club building in Virginia Beach. Events include picnics, bake sales, Christmas parties and the midsummer celebration (Davis, 1998). The members of this club



90-year old Irene Salminen (left) along with son Arthur, and former Oregon fisherman Bill Kinnunen with author in Waynesboro, VA. – Photo: *Mika Roinila*.

also patronize a local Finnish restaurant, the Maple Tree Pancake House, which was founded by a Finn over 20 years ago. According to the owner, he is the only Finnish businessman in the Tidewater area. The specialty of the restaurant are the "Swedish Pancakes" (Swedish because they are better known than the Finnish pancakes and thus supposedly sell better!).

From all the respondents who returned questionnaires, a total of eleven individuals (17%) were aware of any Finnish activities in the state. Of these eleven, nine resided in the DC area, in counties such as Arlington, Fairfax, and

Fauquier, while only two respondents from Chesapeake and Virginia Beach were aware of these clubs. Since all organizational activities are centred around the Washington DC and Virginia Beach areas, Finns further away and throughout the state may not be as likely to join in these activities. Still, numerous individuals in the Capital Region as well as the Virginia Beach area were unaware of these associations. This points to an obvious lack of knowledge in terms of available organizations, or towards a lack of interest amongst the 83% of respondents who do not know any-

thing about Finnish activities or clubs.

## Conclusions

To summarize the major findings of this research, four elements emerge. First, the Finnish ethnic group of Virginia, although present since the early 1900s in small numbers (according to Census data based on country of birth) has shown itself to be an increasing ethnic group since World War Two and even more so since the 1970s. Data based on single and multiple ethnic origin from the 1980 and 1990 Census point to a strong concentration of Finns in the Washington DC and Virginia Beach areas, and a relatively widespread concentration across the remainder of the state.

Secondly, the reasons for moving to the state and the present/past occupations of respondents point to a strong correlation with the mil-

itary service, which is significant in its importance relative to other occupations encountered in the survey. A large proportion of respondents have been or are active members of the various armed forces.

Thirdly, a younger, middle-aged generation is evident amongst the Finnish population, which has a good command of the English language, maintains many professional service occupations, holds higher levels of education and income.

Fourth, very few of the individuals surveyed are aware of the Finnish organizations and activities organized by the Finns in the Washington DC and Virginia Beach areas, which include the Finlandia Foundation, the Finn Spark, Inc., the Lutheran Church, Finnish language classes, as well as the events sponsored by the Embassy of Finland.

While some cultural activities are to be found amongst the Vir-

ginia Finns, most individuals have assimilated into American society and appear to show little interest in finding people of like origin. Future research into the early history of this ethnic group within Virginia could attempt to find ties to the New Sweden colony, along with possible Finnish immigrant involvement in the American Civil War. Needless to say, these historical ties are more archival in nature and will take a great effort on the part of the researcher. It is hoped that this paper has shed some light on the presence of smaller ethnic minorities within the Old Dominion.

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