This piece appeared in the 1990 and again in the 1999 and 2003 issues of An Canach. What Jim wrote then needs to be told again, because it puts (or should put) an end to an error that almost all Hendersons fall into when they begin their search for Virginia origins: that a Thomas Henderson from Dumfries, Scotland, settled in Jamestown in the very earliest years and, from genealogies submitted to the clan, must have been the progenitor of about every Henderson around! This notion apparently arose in some usually reputable genealogical publications – but no sources were given, no documents cited.

The True Thomas Henderson
by James Henderson III

Imaginary ancestors do not have real descendants. That truism has not, however, stopped any number of researchers of Henderson genealogy from embracing the story of an ancestral Thomas Henderson who is said to have arrived in April 1607, or soon thereafter, with the earliest settlers of Virginia. That no documented fact exists to support the myth has in no way discouraged belief in the yarn. It has crept into standard research works, informal family histories, and the records of such organizations as the Daughters of the American Revolution…

They have this Thomas Henderson coming from Dumfries, Scotland, which, if he existed would be altogether possible. He arrived at Jamestown Island, and then moved to places called Yellow Spring and Blue Spring, then to Williamsburg and later to Albemarle County. A son or grandson, Richard Henderson married a daughter Mary of Ensign Washer…

Now to sort out that jumble a bit. No early gazetteer shows Blue Spring or Yellow Spring on or near Jamestown Island. Although Middle Plantation was established at the site in 1663, Williamsburg as such was not founded until 1699; and Albemarle not until 1744, which would have made Thomas Henderson of 1607 extraordinarily long lived.

Ensign Washer (the “Ensign” is a military rand, not a name; his first
name is not recorded) indeed was a member of the House of
Burgesses. He attended the Burgesses in 1619 and was mentioned in
the annals of the Virginia Company...Ensign Washer vanished from
the Virginia records after 1619, and the name never recurred in
colonial records. (There were and are Wash families, however,
including Washes who settled near Hendersons in Hanover County
in the first third of the 18th century.)

Where both Hendersons and Washers fail is in what amounted to
censuses conducted by the Virginia Company.

The first was taken in 1624, and recorded both the living...and those
who died in a 1622 Indian uprising and a 1623 epidemic. No
Hendersons or Washers were named. A 1625 muster of fighting men,
those between the ages of 16 and 60, again omitted Hendersons and
Washers. In fact, the Virginia records, running from 1605 until the
Crown took over the colony in 1624, mention no Henderson as
shareholder, employee, sailor, soldier or settler.

The first Hendersons of record in Virginia were Alexander on the
Rappahannock River in 1648 and Gilbert on the Eastern Shore in
1650. A William was on the Mattaponi River in present King and
Queen County no later than 1661, while a James with wife Christian
was nearby on the Pamunkey Neck, in present King William County,
by 1667. Gilbert and his descendants have a provable lineage down to
this day, but gaps in the records make inferences from the existence
of William and James risky at best...

Jim Henderson is no longer with us, and his knowledge and insight on early
Hendersons is sorely missed. It was he who alerted us to the documentary
problems with our Jamestown Henderson and with other similar cases. Now
among the gears of our Clan Henderson genealogical work is to ferret these
out, correct them as best we can, discover the documented truth, and alert
our Clansmen about these rootless family trees.

The message to you is, be alert! Question your sources (and be sure to
include them in your genealogies)! And remember: Imaginary ancestors do
not have real descendants!