

A Guide to the Voting Records of Fairfax County, 1854-1936

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A Collection in the Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center
Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center
2017

History

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Title Statement

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Profile Description

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Descriptive Summary

Language

English

Creator

Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center

Extent

4.33 linear Feet

Shelf Location

Unit 39, Shelf 5

Repository

Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center

Administrative Information

Access Restrictions

The Collection is open for research.

Use Restrictions

There are no restrictions.

Acquisition Information

Permanent Record of the Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center.

Processing Information

Heavily creased and folded documents were treated with humidity and flattened. Post-1870 poll books with no identifying information on the covers were described using pencil. Oversized documents were placed in flat files and stored in map drawers.

Preferred Citation

Voting Records of Fairfax County, Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center

Biographical Information

The Commonwealth of Virginia ratified its first constitution in 1776, following the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Since its ratification, there have been regular amendments and six major revisions to the state's constitution: 1830, 1851, 1864, 1870, 1902, and 1971. The current constitution as of 2017 is an amended version of the 1971 constitution. These revisions to the Virginia Constitution are representative of the "political, social, regional, and racial climate of the times," according to the Virginia General Assembly.

The constitution of 1851 took significant steps in extending voting rights. In previous versions, only white male property holders could vote, but the 1851 revisions changed this law so that all white men were eligible to vote. Additionally, judges were to be elected rather than appointed and the position of Lieutenant Governor was created.

Article VII of the Constitution of Commonwealth of Virginia establishes the roles and duties of local government systems, with Section 4 of this article mandating, "There shall be elected by the qualified voters of each county and city a treasurer, a sheriff, an attorney for the Commonwealth, a clerk, who shall be clerk of the court in the office of which deeds are recorded, and a commissioner of revenue." The elections of which records are found in this collection fall under this section of the Virginia constitution.

Later significant extensions of voting rights in Virginia include granting the right to vote to African Americans under the 15th amendment to the United States Constitution in 1869, and to women under the 19th amendment in 1920. Our records of voter registration indicate that both African Americans and women in Fairfax County were eager to exercise their civic duties following the ratification of these amendments.

The voting records of Fairfax County are kept at the Fairfax Circuit Court under Title 17.1, Chapter 2 (Clerks, Clerks' Offices and Records) of the Virginia Code, which states, "The circuit court clerks shall have custody of and shall keep all court records, including books, evidence, records, maps, and papers, deposited in their offices or at such location otherwise designated by the clerk, as well as records stored in electronic format whether the storage media for such electronic records are on premises or elsewhere." The code also stipulates, "None of the records or papers of a circuit court shall be removed by the clerk nor allowed by him to be removed out of the county or city wherein the clerk's office is kept."

Scope and Content

Series 1: Poll Books, 1854 - 1914, contains the poll books of Fairfax County pre- and post-1870. Poll books prior to 1870 list the year and precinct, the candidates, their position, and the names of the voters and the votes cast (there was no anonymity in voting). The nature of how poll books were written changed in 1870, when voting became anonymous. Post-1870 poll books are simply a list of electors for each precinct—a list of those who voted but no indication of who they voted for. These documents have been grouped together due to the context in which they were used being the same.

The division of voting precincts also changed in 1870, when each precinct was assigned to a newly created district (also known as a township). The six districts were Centreville, Dranesville, Falls Church, Lee, Mount Vernon, and Providence. Pre-1870 poll books are arranged alphabetical by precinct only; Post-1870 poll books are subdivided by precinct, then arranged alphabetically by township.

The bulk of the series contains documents from 1854 to 1879. There are only two documents dating to after 1879, one from 1909 and another from 1914.

Series 2: Elections, 1858-1936, contains documents relating to the administration and results of elections in Fairfax County. This includes notices of candidates from 1899 to 1901; various voter lists (lists of those with the right to suffrage in each district in 1861, list of voters in each district in 1866, and the registrar's notes of voter registration from 1902 to 1936); commissioners' oaths; election returns; election tickets; and a record of a contested election for Commissioner of Revenue in 1879.

The registrar's notes of voter registration starting in 1904 contain the earliest evidence in this collection that African Americans in Fairfax County were given the right to vote per the 15th Amendment to the United States Constitution, indicated by noting voter race (i.e. "Color: Black"). The registrar's notes after 1920 also contain the earliest evidence that women had gained the right to vote per the 19th Amendment, despite the Virginia General Assembly refusing its ratification until 1952, indicated by the division of registration lists into "Male" and "Female" columns.

The election returns from 1892 to 1911 contain the collection's only oversized documents, which are large tabular compilations of votes for the entire county. The largest of these tables is over 3.5 feet in length.

The election returns contain returns from votes for members of the Virginia Electoral College for the presidential elections of 1892, 1896, 1900, and 1904.

The records of the contested 1879 election of Richard F. Broadwater for Commissioner of Revenue are the only records in the collection of a contested election. The petitioners claimed that the election of Broadwater was "undue and illegal" and was the result of "false returns", demanding that the court either "award a certificate of election to Amos Fox, who received the highest number of votes legally cast... or order a new election for the said office." Broadwater denied all allegations of fraud and there are no records of the election being annulled or a new election being held.

Series 3: Petitions, 1873-1888 (three undated), contains the documentation of petitions to the Fairfax County Court. Most petitions regard the changing of election precincts or voting locations according to shifts in population distribution, or due to the inconvenience of current precincts/locations.

One 1888 petition from the people of Mt. Vernon asks Judge Sangster to appoint a new registrar, due to the "inconvenience of the location of the present registrar...who lives in an out of the way place." The petition also asks that the court order a new registration of voters, "as the old books, which have been in use nearly fifteen years, are so badly worn and mutilated as to be almost useless."

The series also contains what appears to be a draft of a petition, undated and unsigned. The petition asks for an "alteration" to the boundaries of the sixth magisterial district, and on the reverse seems to contain a crude map of said alterations.

Series 4: Capitation Taxes, 1911-1926, contains lists of persons by district and precinct who had paid their capitation taxes (also called poll taxes) for the years noted, thereby ensuring their eligibility to vote. The lists categorize voters as "White" or "Colored," and after 1920, women are included.

Although the U.S. Constitution, in Article I, Section 9, forbids the federal government from levying a capitation or other direct tax, this law did not apply to states until 1966, when the Supreme Court ruled that the poll tax as a prerequisite for voting in a state election was unconstitutional under the Fourteenth Amendment. Thus, beginning in the late nineteenth century, southern states including Virginia made payment of a poll tax a prerequisite to the exercise of suffrage. This requirement disqualified many African Americans who could not afford the tax or subjected their votes to influence by those who paid the tax for them.

Series 5: Miscellaneous, 1854-1924, contains miscellaneous documents relating to voting and elections in Fairfax County. These documents include oaths of office, certifications of votes, commissions, records of election spending, receipts, records of appointments, notices of voter registration, lists of registrars, and notes taken during the Dranesville district convention of 1897.

The contents of the collection and the years it covers are scattered, with many years missing entirely and the collection as a whole seeming incomplete. This is a result of a combination of factors over the years, one being that many documents belonging in the collection were burned or discarded, having been thought to be useless. It also seems as though previous archivists pulled certain documents from other collections and placed them with the voting records, believing them to belong there, resulting in the contents seeming slightly arbitrary. Thus, many documents in Series 5 may seem to be random additions to the collection. For example, the collection contains over 100 records of election spending from 1903, one from 1921, and one 1923. There are no other records of election spending in the collection. Another example is that there is only one record in the collection of a district convention, which took place in Dranesville in 1897, although presumably there was more than one district convention in Fairfax County between 1854 and 1936. Any guess as to how, when, and why the courthouse came to be in possession of the documentation of this specific district convention would be conjecture.

Index Terms

F.W. Richardson, F.D. Richardson, Judge J. Sangster

Fairfax Circuit Court, local courts

Voting, elections, petitions, voter registration, capitation taxes, Presidential elections of 1892, 1896, 1900, 1904

Fairfax County

Poll books, voting lists/tallies, correspondence, clerk's records, booklets, certificates, tax bills/receipts, ballots, election tickets, notices of candidates, petitions, oaths

Paper, cardstock, ink, graphite, staples and string binding

Contents List

Series 1: Poll Books, 1854 - 1909

Subseries 1: Pre-1870

Accotink: 1854, 1858, 1859, 1862, 1865, 1866

Box-folder 1: VR-001

Anandale: 1854, 1858, 1859, 1862, 1866

Box-folder 1: VR-002

Arundle: 1854, 1859, 1862, 1866

Box-folder 1: VR-003

Bailiss': 1858, 1859, 1866, 1867

Box-folder 1: VR-004

Burke Station: 1865, 1866

Box-folder 1: VR-005

Centreville: 1854, 1859, 1862, 1865, 1866

Box-folder 1: VR-006

Dranesville: 1854, 1858, 1859

Box-folder 1: VR-007

Fairfax Court House: 1854, 1858, 1859, 1862, 1865, 1866, 1867

Box-folder 1: VR-008

Falls Church: 1858, 1859, 1862, 1865, 1866

Box-folder 1: VR-009

Hall's: 1854

Box-folder 1: VR-010

Lewinsville-Crossroads: 1854, 1858, 1859, 1862, 1865, 1866

Box-folder 1: VR-011

Millan's: 1854

Box-folder 1: VR-012

Pulman's: 1858, 1859, 1862, 1865, 1866

Box 1: VR-013

Ross's: 1854, 1858, 1859, 1862, 1866

Box-folder 1: VR-014

Sangster's: 1854, 1858, 1859, 1862, 1865, 1866

Box-folder 1: VR-015

Spring Vale: 1862, 1865, 1866

Box-folder 1: VR-016

Vienna: 1862, 1865, 1866, 1867

Box-folder 1: VR-017

West End: 1854, 1858, 1859, 1862, 1865, 1866

Box-folder 1: VR-018

Subseries 2: Post-1870

Centreville-Centreville: 1872, 1873, 1874, 1877

Box-folder 2: VR-019

Centreville-Clifton: 1872, 1875, 1877

Box-folder 2: VR-020

Centreville-Clifton: 1878, 1879, 1914

Box-folder 2: VR-021

Dranesville-Herndon: 1909

Box-folder 2: VR-022

Dranesville-Spring Vale: 1874, 1875, 1877, 1879

Box-folder 2: VR-023

Dranesville-Thompson's: 1872, 1873, 1877, 1878, 1879

Box-folder 2: VR-024

Dranesville-Thornton: 1873, 1874, 1875, 1877, 1878

Box-folder 2: VR-025

Falls Church-Anandale: 1873, 1874, 1875, 1879

Box-folder 2: VR-026

Falls Church-Falls Church: 1875, 1879

Box-folder 2: VR-027

Falls Church-West End: 1872, 1874, 1879

Box-folder 2: VR-028

Lee-Arundelle: May 1875, November 1875, 1877, 1878, 1879

Box-folder 3: VR-029

Lee-Bayliss: 1873, 1874, 1876, 1877, 1879

Box-folder 3: VR-030

Mt. Vernon-Deavers': 1875, 1877

Box-folder 3: VR-032

Mt. Vernon-Moore's: 1879

Box-folder 3: VR-033

Mt. Vernon-Pulman, 1873, 1874, 1875, 1878, 1879

Box-folder 3: VR-034

Providence-Fairfax Court House: 1873, 1875, 1877

Box-folder 3: VR-035

Providence-Fairfax Court House: 1878, 1879

Box-folder 3: VR-036

Providence-Vienna: 1875, 1878, 1879

Box-folder 3: VR-039

Series 2: Elections, 1861 - 1936, undated

Subseries 1: Notice of Candidates

Fairfax County: 1899, 1901

Box-folder 4: VR-040

Centreville: 1899, 1901

Box-folder 4: VR-041

Dranesville: 1899, 1901

Box-folder 4: VR-042

Falls Church: 1899, 1901

Box-folder 4: VR-043

Herndon: 1899, 1901

Box-folder 4: VR-044

Lee: 1899, 1901

Box-folder 4: VR-045

Mt. Vernon: 1899, 1901

Box-folder 4: VR-046

Providence: 1899, 1901

Box-folder 4: VR-047

Subseries 2: Voter Lists

Sub-subseries 1: Lists of Persons with the Right to Suffrage

All districts, 1861

Box-folder 5: VR-048

District #1, 1861

Box-folder 5: VR-048

District #2, 1861

Box-folder 5: VR-048

District #3, 1861

Box-folder 5: VR-048

District #4, 1861

Box-folder 5: VR-048

District #5, 1861

Box-folder 5: VR-048

District #6, 1861

Box-folder 5: VR-048

Sub-subseries 2: List of Voters

District #1, 1866

Box-folder 5: VR-049

District #2, 1866

Box-folder 5: VR-049

District #3, 1866

Box-folder 5: VR-049

District #4, 1866

Box-folder 5: VR-049

District #5, 1866

Box-folder 5: VR-049

District #6, 1866

Box-folder 5: VR-049

Unknown

Box-folder 5: VR-050

Unknown

Box-folder 5: VR-050

Sub-subseries 3: Registrar's Notes

Centreville-Centreville, 1912-1914

Box-folder 5: VR-051

Centreville-Clifton, 1920

Box-folder 5: VR-051

Centreville-Pender, 1920

Box-folder 5: VR-051

Centreville-Swetnam, 1920

Box-folder 5: VR-051

Dranesville-Dranesville, 1905-1936

Box-folder 5: VR-052

Dranesville-Forrestville, 1905-1928

Box-folder 5: VR-052

Dranesville-Herndon, 1904-1936

Box-folder 5: VR-052

Dranesville-Pleasant Valley, 1913

Box-folder 5: VR-052

Dranesville-Thompson's, 1907-1936

Box-folder 5: VR-052

Dranesville-Thornton, 1902-1916

Box-folder 5: VR-052

Falls Church-Anandale, 1928-1936

Box-folder 5: VR-053 (folder)

Falls Church-Falls Church, 1904-1930

Box-folder 5: VR-053

Falls Church-McLean, 1922-1936

Box-folder 5: VR-053

Lee-Burke Station, 1922-1933

Box-folder 5: VR-054

Lee-Woodyard, 1911

Box-folder 5: VR-054

Mt. Vernon-Accotink, 1908-1936

Box-folder 5: VR-055

Mt. Vernon-Moore's, 1910-1916

Box-folder 5: VR-055

Mt. Vernon-Pulman's, 1920

Box-folder 5: VR-055

Providence-Fairfax, 1905

Box-folder 5: VR-056

Providence-Lick, 1915

Box 5: VR-056

Providence-Vienna, 1904-1936

Box-folder 5: VR-056

Unknown, 1911

Box-folder 5: VR-057

Unknown, 1914

Box-folder 5: VR-057

Unknown, 1915

Box-folder 5: VR-057

Unknown, 1928

Box-folder 5: VR-057

Subseries 3: Commissioner's Oaths

[Level 4 Items]

Box-folder 6: VR-058

Subseries 4: Returns

1892

Box-folder OS-002

November 1892

Box-folder 6: VR-059

November 1894

Box-folder 6: VR-060

1895

Box-folder OS-001

May 1895

Box-folder 6: VR-061

1896

Box-folder OS-002

November 1896

Box-folder 6: VR-062

May 1897

Box-folder 6: VR-063, OS-001

November 1897

Box-folder 6: VR-064, OS-001

November 1898

Box-folder 6: VR-065

May 1899

Box-folder 6: VR-066, OS-001

November 1899

Box-folder 6: VR-067, OS-002

May 1900

Box-folder 6: VR-068

November 1900

Box-folder 6: VR-069

1900

Box-folder OS-002

1901

Box-folder OS-001

May 1901

Box-folder 6: VR-070

November 1901

Box-folder 6: VR-071

1903

Box-folder OS-001

November 1903

Box-folder 6: VR-072

November, 1904

Box-folder 7: VR-073

1905

Box-folder OS-001

1905

Box-folder OS-001

November, 1905

Box-folder 7: VR-074

1906

Box-folder OS-002

1910

Box-folder OS-002

November, 1910

Box-folder 7: VR-076

1911

Box-folder OS-001

November, 1911
Box-folder 7: VR-077

Undated
Box-folder 7: VR-078

Subseries 5: Certifications of Returns

1858
Box-folder 7: VR-079

1862
Box-folder 7: VR-079

1863
Box-folder 7: VR-079

1866
Box-folder 7: VR-079

Undated
Box-folder 7: VR-079

Subseries 6: Election Tickets

November, 1911
Box-folder 7: VR-080

Subseries 7: Contested Election

Commissioner of Revenue, 1879
Box-folder 7: VR-081

Series 3: Petitions, 1873 - 1888, undated

To re-divide Fairfax Co. into townships, 1873
Box-folder 7: VR-082

To establish Annandale Precinct, 1873
Box-folder 7: VR-083

To change election precinct, Herndon, 1876
Box-folder 7: VR-084

To change voting place, Mt. Vernon, 1879
Box-folder 7: VR-085

To est. precinct with Gum Spring School House, 1882
Box-folder 7: VR-086

To change voting place, Herndon-Thornton's, 1884
Box-folder 7: VR-087

To change registrar, Mt. Vernon, 1888

Box-folder 7: VR-088

To move voting place from Langley to Lewinsville, undated

Box-folder 7: VR-089

To establish voting place at JT Wells Stone/Bull Run, undated

Box-folder 7: VR-090

To re-divide voting districts, draft, undated

Box-folder 7: VR-091

Series 4: Capitation Taxes, 1911 - 1926

Centreville District, 1911-1913

Box-folder 8: VR-092

Dranesville-Herndon, 1918-1920

Box-folder 8: VR-093

Dranesville-Herndon, 1920-1922

Box-folder 8: VR-093

Dranesville-Herndon, 1924-1926

Box-folder 8: VR-093

Fall's Church-Fall's Church, 1918-1920

Box-folder 8: VR-094

Fall's Church-Fall's Church, 1920-1922

Box-folder 8: VR-094

Fall's Church-Fall's Church, 1924-1926

Box-folder 8: VR-094

Providence-Fairfax, 1921-1923

Box-folder 8: VR-095

Providence-Vienna, 1920-1922

Box-folder 8: VR-095

Providence-Vienna, 1921-1923

Box-folder 8: VR-095

Series 5: Miscellaneous, 1854 - 1923, undated

Certificate of oath taken by election commissioners, 1854

Box-folder 8: VR-096

Conductor's oath of impartiality, 1862

Box-folder 8: VR-096

Registrar's oath of office, 1884

Box-folder 8: VR-096

Certificate of Justice of the Peace's oath of office, 1885

Box-folder 8: VR-096

Certificate of prohibition vote, 1885

Box-folder 8: VR-097

Dranesville District Convention, 1897

Box-folder 8: VR-098

Commissions for members of the electoral board, 1898

Box-folder 8: VR-099

Election spending, 1903, 1921, 1923

Box-folder 8: VR-100

Misc. receipts, 1904

Box-folder 8: VR-101

Receipts from Auditor of Public Accounts, 1908

Box-folder 8: VR-102

Appointment to the electoral board, 1924

Box-folder 8: VR-103

Appointment to the electoral board, 1924

Box-folder 8: VR-103

Persons appointed to divide magisterial districts, undated

Box-folder 8: VR-104

Notice of commencement of voter registration, undated

Box-folder 8: VR-105

Notice to divide Lee District into election districts, undated

Box-folder 8: VR-106

List of registrars, undated

Box-folder 8: VR-107