

A Guide to the Virginia Chief Inspector of Vessels Quarterly Reports, 1856-1861

Virginia Chief Inspector of Vessels Quarterly Reports, 1856-1856
1856-1856

A Collection in the Library of Virginia 36456
Library of Virginia
2002

History

Processed by: Library of Virginia Staff
Funding: Web version of the finding aid funded in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Title Statement

A Guide to the Virginia Chief Inspector of Vessels Quarterly Reports, 1856-1861

Subtitle: Chief Inspector of Vessels Quarterly Reports, Virginia, 1856-1861

Collection: 36456

Author: Description Services Staff

Sponsor: Web version of the finding aid funded in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Publication Statement

File size: 3 kb

Date: © 2002 By the Library of Virginia.

Publisher: Library of Virginia

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Profile Description

Creation: Machine-readable finding aid derived from MARC record. Created by Paige Neal 1856-1861

Language Usage: Description is in English

Revision Description

Feb 14, 2004	PUBLIC "-//Library of Virginia//TEXT (US::Vi::vi00096::Virginia Chief Inspector of Vessels Quarterly Reports, 1856-1861)//EN" "vi00096.xml" converted from EAD 1.0 to 2002 by v1to02.xsl (sy2003-10-15).
Feb 27, 2004	converted to conform to eadVIVA.dtd by vivastrict.xsl
2014-01-08	Converted to schema conforming EAD by dtd2schema.vh.xsl.

Descriptive Summary

Accession number

36456

Language

English

Physical Characteristics

17 volumes

Physical Location

State Records Collection, Office of the Governor (Record Group 3)

Repository

Library of Virginia

Administrative Information

Access Restrictions

There are no restrictions.

Use Restrictions

There are no restrictions.

Acquisition Information

No acquisition information available.

Preferred Citation

Virginia Chief Inspector of Vessels, Quarterly Reports, 1856-1861. Accession 36456, State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

Biographical/Historical Information

On March 17, 1856, the General Assembly adopted a law entitled, "An act providing additional protection for the slave property of the citizens of this Commonwealth." This legislation established a new inspection system to prevent the escape of both slaves and criminals aboard commercial shipping vessels. All vessels outward bound for any northern port were subject to the inspection. The act, however, did not apply to vessels owned by the United States government, citizens of Virginia, or citizens of foreign countries.

Dr. Jesse J. Simkins was appointed as the first Chief Inspector and Edward S. Gayle and James L. Adams were appointed as river inspectors and assigned to the Rappahannock and Potomac rivers, respectively. Ultimately, twelve men served as inspectors until 1861. The pilots, however, acted as the primary investigators and two pilot boats were regularly assigned to intercept daily shipping and issue certificates to those vessels cleared for passage. Vessel inspections ceased in 1861, soon after Virginia seceded from the Union.

Only one incident resulted in a prosecuted case of assisting a slave to escape. On May 28, 1858, an inspector discovered a fugitive slave aboard the schooner Francis French. Free black crew member William H. Thompson confessed his involvement as the lone perpetrator and he received the maximum sentence of ten years in the penitentiary.

Chief Inspectors included Dr. Jesse J. Simkins (March 1856 - May 1858) and William H. Parker (May 1858 - 1861).

River Inspectors included Edward S. Gayle (March 1856 - June 1856); James L. Adams (April 1856 - August 1859); John F. D. Robinson (June 1856 - July 1857); Capt. Robert B. Fitchett (July 1857 - September 1858); John M. Ford (June 1858 - January 1860); John Day Gressitt (September 1858 - 1861); George G. Wise (June 1859 - September 1860); Devereux B. Traverse (August 1859 - 1861); John S. Braxton (September 1859 - January 1860); and James Fossett (Feb. 1861).

Scope and Content Information

This collection consists of detailed quarterly reports by the Chief Inspector of Vessels to Governors Henry Wise and John Letcher from October 1856 to March 1861. These reports typically include the date of inspection, vessel's name, homeport, previous port of call, destination, cargo, vessel owner, captain and number of crew. Reports generally cover the areas of Hampton Roads, the Potomac River (Alexandria), the Rappahannock River and the York River. Cargo often includes coal, corn, cotton, flour, merchandise, oysters, potatoes, shingles, timber, and wheat. These reports provide a unique register of more than thirteen thousand vessels plying the waterways of the Commonwealth. Quarterly reports for the period October to December 1857 did not survive.

This collection also includes quarterly reports to the Chief Inspector of Vessels from river inspectors, 1856 Mar-Dec, for Hampton Roads, Potomac River and Rappahannock River. These reports include date of inspection, vessel name, destination, cargo, home port, captain name and a list of crew member names.

Arrangement

Arranged chronologically.

Contents List

Chief Inspector of Vessels Quarterly Reports, 1856-1861.

Quarterly Report, 1856 Oct-Dec.

Box 1

Quarterly Report (See Gov. Wise Executive Papers, 1857 June), 1857 Jan-Mar.

Quarterly Report, 1857 May-June.

Box 1

Quarterly Report (See Gov. Wise Executive Papers, 1857 Dec), 1857 July-Sept.

Quarterly Report, 1858 Jan-Apr.

Box 1

Quarterly Report, 1858 May-June.

Box 1

Quarterly Report, 1858 July-Sept.

Box 1

Quarterly Report, 1858 Oct-Dec.

Box 1

Quarterly Report, 1859 Jan-Mar.

Box 2

Quarterly Report, 1859 Apr-June.

Box 2

Quarterly Report, 1859 July-Sept.

Box 2

Quarterly Report, 1859 Oct-Dec.

Box 2

Quarterly Report, 1860 Jan-Mar.

Box 3

Quarterly Report, 1860 Apr-June.

Box 3

Quarterly Report, 1860 July-Sept.

Box 3

Quarterly Report, 1860 Oct - 1861 Jan.

Box 3

Quarterly Report, 1861 Jan-Mar.

Box 3

River Inspector Quarterly Reports to Chief Inspector of Vessels, 1856.

Quarterly Report - Hampton Roads, 1856 Mar-June

Box 4

Folder 1

Quarterly Report - Hampton Roads, 1856 Apr-June

Box 4

Folder 2

Quarterly Report - Hampton Roads, 1856 July-Sept

Box 4

Folder 3

Quarterly Report - Hampton Roads, 1856 Oct

Box 4

Folder 4

Quarterly Report - Hampton Roads, 1856 Oct-Nov

Box 4

Folder 5

Quarterly Report - Hampton Roads, 1856 Dec

Box 4

Folder 6

Quarterly Report - Potomac River, 1856 Apr-June

Box 4

Folder 7

Quarterly Report - Potomac River, 1856 July-Sept

Box 4

Folder 8

Quarterly Report - Potomac River, 1856 Sept-Nov

Box 4

Folder 9

Quarterly Report - Potomac River, 1856 Nov-Dec

Box 4

Folder 10

Quarterly Report - Rappahannock River, 1856 Oct-Dec

Box 4

Folder 10

