

A Guide to the Northumberland County (Va.) Records Related to the Registration of Free Person, 1803-1858

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A Collection in the Library of Virginia
Library of Virginia
2006

History

Processed by: Eddie Wooward

Title Statement

A Guide to the Northumberland County (Va.) Records Related to the Registration of Free Person, 1803-1858

Subtitle: Northumberland County (Va.) Records Related to the Registration of Free Persons, 1803-1858

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Publication Statement

Date: © 2006 By The Library of Virginia. All Rights Reserved.

Publisher: Library of Virginia

Profile Description

Creation: Machine-readable finding aid derived from MARC record, created by Eddie Woodward, 2006

Language Usage: Description is in English

Descriptive Summary

Language

English

Collector

Northumberland County (Va.) Circuit Court.

Physical Characteristics

2 folders; digital images.

Location

Library of Virginia

Repository

Library of Virginia

Administrative Information

Access Restrictions

"Register of Free Negroes," 1803-1849, is digitized and available through [Virginia Untold: The African American Narrative Digital Collection](#) on the Library of Virginia website. Please use digital images.

"Register of Free Negroes," 1849-1858, is digitized and available through [Virginia Untold: The African American Narrative Digital Collection](#) on the Library of Virginia website. Please use digital images.

"Free Negro" Registrations, 1818-1845, is digitized and available through [Virginia Untold: The African American Narrative Digital Collection](#) on the Library of Virginia website. Please use digital images.

Use Restrictions

There are no restrictions.

Acquisition Information

"Free Negro" registrations came to the Library of Virginia in a transfer of court papers from Northumberland County under accession number 43283 in 2007.

Digital Image of the "Register of Free Negroes," 1803-1849 and 1849-1858 came to the Library of Virginia under accession 5455 in 2025

Processing Information

Both volumes of Northumberland County (Va.) Register of Free Negroes, were originally described in a separate Northumberland County (Va.) Free and Enslaved record that only described microfilmed material.

Both volumes Northumberland County (Va.) Register of Free Negroes, were microfilmed by the Library of Virginia's Imaging Services Division, the volume was then digitally scanned by the Virginia Untold project Manager in 2025.

"Free Negro" Registrations, were originally described as part of the Northumberland County (Va.) Free and Enslaved Records but were removed to the present Northumberland County (Va.) Records Related to the Registration of Free Persons in November 2025 to enhance the context between the record types.

These records have been digitized and indexed by Library of Virginia staff, and the Virginia Untold Project Manager for the purposes of Virginia Untold.

Encoded by E. Woodward, 2026; M. Mason, November 2025.

Preferred Citation

Northumberland County (Va.) Records Related to the Registration of Free Persons, 1803-1858 [include series or volume information]. Local government records collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Va.

Adjunct Descriptive Data

Related Material

See Also: [Northumberland County \(Va.\)Free and Enslaved Records](#)

Records related to free and enslaved people of Northumberland County (Va.) and other localities are available through the [Virginia Untold: The African American Narrative Digital Collection](#) on the Library of Virginia website.

Additional Northumberland County (Va.) court records can be found on microfilm at the Library of Virginia.Consult ["A Guide to Virginia County and City Records on Microfilm."](#)

Location of Originals

"Register of Free Negroes," 1803-1849, and "Register of Free Negroes," 1849-1858, are retained in the locality by the Northumberland County Circuit Court.

Historical Information

Context for Record Type:

"Free Negro" Registers

In 1793, the Virginia General Assembly specified that "free Negroes or mulattoes" were required to be registered and numbered in a book to be kept by the town clerk, which shall specify "age, name, colour, and stature, by whom, and in what court the said negro or mulatto was emancipated; or that such negro or mulatto was born free." The process was extended to counties in 1803. Although some clerks were already recording such features, an 1834 Act of Assembly made it a uniform requirement to record identifying marks

and scars and the instrument of emancipation, whether by deed or will. This bound register often coincided with a loose certificate containing largely the same identifying information. Both the registration system and the process of renewal was enforced differently in the various Virginia localities. Thus, the information found in these registers may differ from year to year and across localities.

The register books resulting from the administration of the 1793 and 1803 Act of Assembly are evidence of Virginia legislators' reaction to a quickly growing free Black and Multiracial population in Virginia in the post Revolutionary War period. Acts such as these allowed white officials to police the activities and movement of free Black community members throughout the state thereby restricting their autonomy.

"Free Negro" Registrations

In 1793, the Virginia General Assembly specified that "free Negroes or mulattoes" were required to "be registered and numbered in a book to be kept by the town clerk, which shall specify age, name, color, status and by whom, and in what court emancipated." These entries often coincided with the creation of a loose certificate containing largely the same identifying information.

Documents in this record group differ from the bound volumes referred to as "registers." These registration records typically appear in the form of certificates or handwritten statements recording the free status of a Black or multiracial person. They can include the free person's name, sometimes age, a brief physical description, and the circumstances of the person's freedom or emancipation, parents, former enslaver, place or date of emancipation. There are also affidavits that were given by individuals affirming a free person's status, as well as written descriptions of free people. In some cases, a person would not have a registration to submit to the court. Instead they produced some other form of identification proving their free status, for example, a deed of emancipation, a will, an apprenticeship indenture, or an affidavit of someone testifying to their character and status.

Locality History:Northumberland County was named probably for the English county. It was formed about 1645 from the district of Chickacoan, the early-seventeenth-century name for the region between the Potomac and the Rappahannock Rivers. The date of the county's formation is conjectural because the act of assembly creating it is no longer extant, but internal evidence shows that the county was functioning in 1645.

Scope and Content

Northumberland County (Va.) Records Related to the Registration of Free Persons,1803-1858, includes two volumes of "Register of Free Negroes," 1803-1858; and "Free Negro" Registrations, 1818-1845.

"Register of Free Negroes," 1803-1849, lists the registration number, name, age, skin color, stature, marks or scars, in what court the person was emancipated or whether the person was born free. Some clerks recorded additional information not required by law. The register is 37 leaves and contains 508 register entries no. 1-508. The volume is in poor condition with torn edges, some text is therefore not legible. [digitized]

"Register of Free Negroes," 1849-1858, lists the registration number, name, age, skin color, stature, marks or scars, in what court the person was emancipated or whether the person was born free. Some clerks recorded additional information not required by law. The register is 31 leaves with entries and contains about 226 register entries no. 508-774. (No index) [digitized]

"Free Negro" registrations, 1818-1845, includes applications to register as a "free negro," 1818 and 1822, and registrations, 1829-1845. These documents contain the name, sometimes age and a brief physical description, and the circumstances of the person's freedom or emancipation. If born free, reference is sometimes made to parents. If emancipated, the name of the emancipating enslaver, place and date of emancipation, and prior registration as a free negro are usually mentioned. [digitized]

Arrangement

This collection is arranged

- Series I:Series I: "Free Negro" Registers, 1803-1858
- Series II: "Free Negro" Registrations, 1818-145

Contents List

Series I: "Free Negro" Registers 1803-1858

Extent

Digital Images [Use digital Images]

Physical Location Library of Virginia

Barcode number 0007913271: Register of Free Negroes 1803-1849

Barcode number 0007913272: Register of Free Negroes 1849-1858

Series II: "Free Negro" Registrations, 1818-145

Extent

2 folders; digital images [Use digital Images]

Physical Location Library of Virginia

Barcode number 1189869: Free and Enslaved Records, 1786-1862

Library of Virginia