

A Guide to the Norfolk County (Va.) Enslaved and Free Records, 1718-1862

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History

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Descriptive Summary

Barcode number

1115577, 1188995.

Language

English

Collector

Chesapeake (Va.) Circuit Court.

Physical Characteristics

0.90 cu. ft. (2 boxes)

Location

Library of Virginia

Repository

The Library of Virginia

Administrative Information

Access Restrictions

There are no restrictions.

Use Restrictions

There are no restrictions.

Acquisition Information

These items came to the Library of Virginia in shipments of court papers from Norfolk County.

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Adjunct Descriptive Data

Related Material

Digital records may be found in the Virginia Untold: The African American Narrative Digital Collection at the Library of Virginia. Search the [Virginia Untold: The African American Narrative Digital Collection](#) Virginia Untold: The African American Narrative Digital Collection available at Virginia Memory.

Historical Information

Norfolk County probably was named by Adam Thoroughgood, a local resident, for his native county in England. It was formed from Lower Norfolk County in 1691. Norfolk County became extinct in 1963, when it was consolidated with the city of South Norfolk to form the city of Chesapeake. Portsmouth, incorporated as a city in 1858, was previously part of Norfolk County.

Acts passed by the Virginia Legislature in 1793 and 1803 required every “free negro” or “mulatto” to be registered and numbered in a book to be kept by the county clerk. This collection contains records involved in the registration process. The registration language and process varied across localities, thus the information and type of records may differ. Registration records found in this collection include numbered certificates that recorded the free person’s name, sometimes age, a brief physical description, and the circumstances of the person’s freedom or emancipation. If born free, a reference is sometimes made to the parents. If emancipated, the emancipating owner, place, and date may be mentioned. There are affidavits that were given by individuals affirming a free person’s status, as well as written descriptions of free persons. In addition, there are registrations that are loose papers matching information found in the bound volumes of registered “free negroes” kept in the court house.

In 1806, the General Assembly moved to remove the free Black population from Virginia with a law that stated that any emancipated enslaved person, freed after May 1, 1806, who remained in the Commonwealth more than a year, would forfeit the right to freedom and be sold by the Overseers of the Poor for the benefit of the parish. Families wishing to stay were to petition the legislature through the local county court. Beginning in 1837, emancipated enslaved persons could petition the local courts for permission to remain.

Beginning in 1778, enslavers who brought enslaved persons into Virginia were required to register the enslaved persons with the county court and sign an oath agreeing not to bring enslaved persons into the Commonwealth with the intent of selling them. Certificates of importation, sometimes entitled certificates of nonimportation, contain information whereby an enslaver swears that (s)he has not imported the enslaved person from Africa and that (s)he has not brought the enslaved person into Virginia with the purpose of selling the enslaved person. The enslaved person is sometimes named, but not always, and occasionally information is given as to age, birthdate, and the state the individuals are moving from.

The General Assembly of Virginia passed a law as early as July 1, 1861, calling for the enrollment of free Black persons to work in the public service.

Eighteenth-century Virginia law required the removal of an ear for enslaved persons convicted of a range of crimes, from stealing to capital offenses.

Scope and Content

Materials in the Library of Virginia's collections contain historical terms, phrases, and images that are offensive to modern readers. These include demeaning and dehumanizing references to race, ethnicity, and nationality; enslaved or free status; physical and mental ability; religion; sex; and sexual orientation and gender identity.

Norfolk County (Va.) Enslaved and Free Records, 1718-1862, contains "Applications for non-negro certification," 1833-1860; "Applications and petitions to register as a free negro," 1817-1855; "Certificates of importation," 1812 and 1817; "Deeds of emancipation and manumission," 1782-1801; "Free negro certificates of registration," 1782-1862; "Free negro tax records," 1822-1860; "Indentures of Apprenticeship," 1726-1861; "Patrol records," 1803-1860; "Petition for reenslavement", 1861; "Records pertaining to the sale and hiring out of enslaved persons, 1807-1859; "Requisitions for public use," 1861-1862; "Valuation of slaves," 1835; Miscellaneous free Black persons records, 1770-1861 and Miscellaneous enslaved persons records, 1797-1859 and undated.

"Applications for non-negro certification," 1833-1860, includes Court orders certifying individuals are of Native American descent and are not free Black persons or free persons of color. These contain only the name of the individual and a record of their registration with the court as persons of Native American descent. The collection contains records for Asa Price and members of the Price, Perkins, Bass, and Newton families, 1833; Mary Blount, 1851; James Howell, 1851; Amanda Perkins and Pastora and Oliver Bissell, 1855; and William Turner, 1860.

"Applications and petitions to register as a free negro," 1817-1855, contain the name of the person applying and the reason for the application. They sometimes include information documenting the individual's free status, such as date of emancipation or birth to free parents, or prior registration in Norfolk County or another county. Some records include information about when the individual moved to Norfolk County, or lost their registration. The collection contains the petition of Ephraim, 1817; and the applications of Harriet of Mabry, 1850; Jim Pugh, 1851; Martha Randolph, 1852; Edward Lawrence, 1853; George Reed, 1854; and Libby, emancipated by Richard Carney, 1855.

"Certificates of importation," 1812 and 1817, contain a statement documenting William Wilson's removal of an enslaved woman by the name of Dolly from Currituck County, North Carolina, to Virginia, recorded 1812; and a statement documenting John Hodge's removal of an enslaved man and an enslaved woman and her five children from North Carolina to Virginia, recorded in 1817. The document gives the name and age of each person brought into Virginia, and a brief physical description of each person, and Hodges' oath that he has not brought enslaved persons into Virginia for the purpose of sale.

Deeds of emancipation and manumission, 1782-1801, contain copies of deeds of emancipation for enslaved person emancipated in Nansemond and Accomack Counties, as well as one deed from Norfolk County. These record the name of the former enslaver, the name of the enslaved person, the date or age at which the enslaved person will be freed, the date the deed was written, and the date the deed was proved. The age of the enslaved person at the time the deed was written, a surname assigned to the freed enslaved person by the enslaver, and the enslaver's reason for emancipation are sometimes given.

"Free negro certificates of registration," 1782-1862, recorded the free person's name, sometimes age, a brief physical description, and the circumstances of the person's freedom or emancipation. If born free, a reference is sometimes made to the parents. If emancipated, emancipating enslaver, place and date of emancipation, and prior registration are usually recorded. There may also be affidavits that were given by individuals affirming a free person's status, as well as written descriptions of free persons. In addition, there are registrations that are loose papers matching information found in the bound volumes of registered "free negroes" kept in the court house.

"Free negro tax records" (photocopies), 1822-1860, contains "Free negro delinquent tax list" which records the names of free Blacks returned for nonpayment of local taxes. The lists contain the name of the person charged, the amount charged, and sometimes the parish or district.

"Indentures of Apprenticeship," 1726-1861, are comprised mostly of indentures binding out free Black children whose parents have died or are unable to support them. These include the name of the child and sometimes the parent, the child's gender, age in years and months, to whom bound, trade or occupation to be taught, length and terms of the indenture, and the name of the witness to the indenture. The collection also contains a bond transferring the apprenticeship of Henry Clay Barrett from John Nicols to W. Pettyjohn, 1853; and a voucher of service completed issued to Thomas Young, 1798.

Patrol records, 1803-1860. These records consist of reports, accounts, claims, and summonses. They contain the names of individuals summoned to patrol the enslaved population, reports of patrols made, and the amount charged to the county for the work.

"Records of enslaved persons rented or hired out," 1807-1859. These records are comprised of a Memo (photocopy), circa 1840, of estates in the hands of the late sheriff and where property is to be rented or hired out; and a collection of bonds for the hire or rent of enslaved persons, 1807-1859. The memo contains the names of the enslaved persons, the estate of they which they are enslaved, and the names of the individuals who hired the enslaved persons. The bonds contain the name of the enslaved person hired, the names of the

parties renting and leasing, the work to be done, and the amount to be paid to the owner of the enslaved worker.

"Records pertaining to the sale and hiring out of enslaved persons," 1718-1859. These records are comprised of bills of sale, orders to sell enslaved persons, requests, and recommendations to sell enslaved persons, one of which includes an advertisement for the sale of the enslaved individual. The records contain the name of the enslaved person, the enslaver, the purchaser, and sometimes a description of a enslaved person's character and/or the reason the enslaved person is being sold. Also included is a bond from Richard White to Abner Nash for the conveyance of enslaved persons from Thomas Nash to Monica Nash, 1796.

"Requisitions for Public Use," 1861-1862, contain a list of 32 free Black men called for military service, 1861 Dec. 16; a list of seven free Blacks men requisitioned in Portsmouth, 1861 Dec. 21, for service in the defense of Carney Island; a letter ordering the requisition of 30 free Black men for the construction of defense works at Carney Island, 1861 Dec. 14; a letter ordering the requisition of free Black men to work on the defenses of the Department of Norfolk, 1862 Apr 25; and a partial list of free Black men to be summoned in Portsmouth, 1862 Feb. 6. Also included are letters from the Engineers Headquarters at Norfolk to the Norfolk County sheriff and justices ordering the requisitions.

Miscellaneous records pertaining to free Black persons, 1833-1861 and undated. Included are Daniel Clarke's certificate stating that he lost his ear to a mule, and not any other cause, recorded in Kent County, Maryland, 1740, and in Norfolk County, Virginia, 1770; a report of the commitment of Jane Sims (?) to jail for want of free papers, 1833; a report of the commitment of Joseph Evans to jail for want of free papers, 1849; an order pertaining to a claim on the estate of Diana Wright, a free woman, for her burial expenses, 1861; and the acquittal of Peter Cartwright (?), undated, for an unspecified offense.

Miscellaneous records pertaining to enslaved persons, 1797-1859 and undated. Included are a list of enslaved persons, undated, with no enslaver identified; a letter from William Ingram to Lewis Grimes charging a person enslaved by Grimes with carrying off a woman enslaved by Ingram and going about as a free man, 1797 February 13; a "slave pass" for an enslaved person named Guy, signed by Mary Dougless, 1803; and affidavits and orders pertaining to self-liberators Alsy, Cuffie, and child, 1852; Charles, 1853, and Belle, 1837.

Contents List

Barcode number 1115577

Scope and Content

"Free negro certificates of registration," 1782-1862; "Applications for non-negro certification," 1833-1860; "Applications and petitions to register as a free negro," 1817-1855; Deeds of Emancipation and Manumission, 1782-1801; "Free negro tax records," 1822-1860.

Barcode number 1188995

Scope and Content

"Indentures of Apprenticeship," 1726-1861; "Certificates of importation," 1812 and 1817; Bills of Sale for enslaved persons, 1718-1859; Bond of Conveyance, Applications and Orders to Sell enslaved persons, 1796-1856; "Patrol records," 1803-1860; "Records pertaining to the sale and hiring out of enslaved persons, 1807-1859; "Requisitions for public use," 1861-1862; Miscellaneous free Black persons records, 1770-1861 and Miscellaneous enslaved persons records, 1797-1859 and undated.