

A Guide to the Rockingham County (Va.) Records Related to the Registration of Free Persons, 1807-1861

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1807-1861

A Collection in the Library of Virginia
Library of Virginia
2008

History

Processed by: Sarah Nerney

Title Statement

A Guide to the Rockingham County (Va.) Records Related to the Registration of Free Persons, 1807-1861

Subtitle: Rockingham County (Va.) Records Related to the Registration of Free Persons, 1807-1861

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Publication Statement

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Profile Description

Creation: Machine-readable finding aid derived from MS Word, created by Sarah Nerney, 8 May 2008

Language Usage: Description is in English

Descriptive Summary

Language

English

Collector

Rockingham County (Va.) Circuit Court.

Extent

Digital images1 volume88 items

Location

Library of Virginia

Repository

Library of Virginia

Administrative Information

Access Restrictions

"Free Negro" Registrations and the "Register of Free Negroes," are 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" records came to the Library of Virginia in a transfer of court papers from Rockingham County in 2003 under 40981

"Register of Free Negroes" came to the Library of Virginia in a transfer of court papers from Rockingham County in 2022 under accession number 53888. Digitized images created from the original volume created accessioned in 2024 under accession number 54092.

Processing Information

Free Negro" registrations, affidavits, and certificates, were originally described as part of the Rockingham County (Va.) Free and Enslaved Records, were removed to the present Rockingham County (Va.) Records related to the Registration of Free Persons record to enhance the context between record types in June 2026.

Encoded by S. Nerney 8 May 2008; Updated by M. Mason June 2026

Preferred Citation

Rockingham County (Va.) Records Related to the Registration of Free Person, 1807-1861 [include series information]. Local government records collection, Rockingham County Court Records. The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Va.

Alternative Form Available

Rockingham County (Va.) "Register of Free Negroes," 1807-1859 also available on microfilm, Rockingham County (Va.) Reel 676

Adjunct Descriptive Data

Related Material

See also: [Rockingham County\(Va.\) Free and Enslaved Records](#)

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

Additional Rockingham County (Va.) Court Records can be found on microfilm at The Library of Virginia website. Consult ["A Guide to Virginia County and City Records on Microfilm."](#)

Historical Information

p>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: Rockingham County was named for Charles Watson-Wentworth, second marquis of Rockingham, who supported the colonies during the years before and during the Revolutionary War. The county was formed from Augusta County in 1778. The county seat is the city of Harrisonburg.

Lost Locality History: Created in 1778. A courthouse fire in 1787 destroyed wills and estate records, primarily. In June 1864 during the Civil War, court records (mostly volumes) were removed from the courthouse and loaded on a wagon to be taken to place of safety on or beyond the Blue Ridge. The wagon was overtaken by Union troops near Port Republic and set on fire, which was put out by local citizens. Many order books, deed books, will books, and fiduciary books, however, were lost or severely damaged by the fire. The loose records that remained at the courthouse were undamaged. Pre-1865 records including deeds and wills were rerecorded following an act of assembly passed in November 1884.

Scope and Content

Rockingham County (Va.) Records Related to the Registration of Free Persons, 1807-1861, include "Register of Free Negroes," 1807-1859; and "Free Negro" registrations, certifications and affidavits, 1810-1861.

"Register of Free Negroes," 1807-1859, lists the registration number, age, name, 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. There is an index at the front of the volume.

"Free Negro" registrations, certifications and affidavits, 1810-1861, contain the name of the free person, sometimes the individual's age and a brief physical description, and a statement or affidavit based either on another person's knowledge or on other official documentary evidence seen by the certifier that this person was either born free or was emancipated. If born free, reference is sometimes made to parents. If emancipated, emancipating owner, place and date of emancipation, and prior registration as a free negro are usually mentioned. Occasionally the register number is given; this number corresponds to the entry number in the "Register of Free Negroes" kept by the clerk of court. This group of records also contains two undated registrations refused on the grounds that the individuals were not born in Rockingham County.

Arrangement

This collection is arranged

- Series I: Registers of "Free Negroes," 1807-1859
- Series II: "Free Negro" registrations, 1810-1861

Contents List

Series I: Registers of "Free Negroes," 1852-1862

Extent

Extent: 1 volume; Digital images [use digital images]

Physical Location Library of Virginia

0007834348: Register of Free Negroes, 1807-1859

Series II: "Free Negro" Registrations, 1833-1861

Extent

Extent: 88 items, digital images [use digital images]

Physical Location Library of Virginia

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Barcode number 1159564: Free and Enslaved Records, 1783-1861

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