

A Guide to the Rockingham County (Va.) Judgments (Freedom Suits), 1811, 1859

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History

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Title Statement

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Profile Description

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Descriptive Summary

Barcode number

0007534434

Language

English

Collector

Rockingham County (Va.) Circuit Court

Physical Characteristics

.10 cu. ft.

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 transfers of court papers from Rockingham County.

Preferred Citation

Rockingham County (Va.) Judgments (Freedom Suits), 1811, 1859. Local government records collection, Rockingham County Court Records. The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia 23219.

Adjunct Descriptive Data

Related Material

Additional Rockingham County Court Records are found at the Library of Virginia.

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

Additional freedom suits may be found in the Rockingham County Chancery Causes. Search the [the Chancery Records Index](#) found on the Library of Virginia web site. Enter the tilde symbol in the plaintiff surname field.

Rockingham County is one of Virginia's Lost Records Localities. Additional Rockingham County Records may be found in the Virginia Lost Records Localities Collection at the Library of Virginia. Search the [Lost Records Localities Digital Collection](#) available at Virginia Memory.

For more information and a listing of lost records localities see [Lost Records research note](#).

Historical Information

Slaves sued for emancipation in freedom suits based on the following: they were descendant(s) of a free female ancestor, typically a Native American (Hening Statutes, volume 2, p.170); failure of slaveowner(s) to abide by the 1778 slave nonimportation act (Henings Statutes, volume 9, pp. 471-472); or claimed to have been freed by slaveowner(s) by deed of emancipation or last will and testament (Henings Statutes volume 11, pp. 39-40)

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.

A courthouse fire in 1787 destroyed primarily wills and estate records. 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 afire, 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.) Judgments (Freedom Suits), 1811, 1859, consist of two suits for freedom initiated by slaves.

Gracy and her children Dennis, Ben, Rebecca Ann, Jeff, Jacob, Charity Ann, Maria Jane, Diana, and William Henry who sought to gain their freedom from the Executor of James Fulton on the law side of the court. The slaves' argument for freedom was based on the fact that they were descendants of a free woman of color, Nancy Holley. The jury of the circuit court of Rockingham County supported the slaves' claim to their freedom. The defendant appealed the decision to the Virginia Court of Appeals which affirmed the circuit court's decision in 1859.

The case is identified by style of suit consisting of plaintiff and defendant names. Surnames of others involved in a suit, including secondary plaintiffs and defendants, witnesses, deponents and affiants, and family members with surnames different from the plaintiff or defendant are indexed. Also identified are names of slaves and slaveowners found in suit as well as whether slave(s) won their freedom. Predominant

documents found in freedom suits include petitions, records of suits, depositions, affidavits, wills, among other items. Information found in documents include slave's argument for freedom, acquisition of slaves by slaveowners, slave ancestry, and relationship between slaves and slaveowners.

Writ of habeas corpus initiated by John Holeman in 1811 claiming to be illegally detained in jail as a runaway slave. Holeman claimed to be a free person because he was the child of a free woman named Dina.

Judgments (Freedom Suits) are useful when researching local history and genealogical information, particularly for African Americans. They are a valuable source of local, state, social, and legal history and serve as a primary source for understanding a locality's history.

Index Terms

Corporate Names:

Rockingham County (Va.) Circuit Court.

Subjects:

African Americans -- Virginia.

Free African Americans -- Virginia -- Rockingham County.

Slaveholders -- Virginia -- Rockingham County.

Slavery -- Virginia -- Rockingham County.

Geographical Names:

Rockingham County (Va.) -- History.

Rockingham County (Va.) -- Genealogy

Genre and Form Terms:

Civil actions -- Virginia -- Rockingham County.

Freedom suits -- Virginia -- Rockingham County.

Judicial records -- Virginia -- Rockingham County.

Local government records -- Virginia -- Rockingham County.

Petitions -- Virginia -- Rockingham County.

Wills -- Virginia -- Rockingham County.

Arrangement

Arranged chronologically.