

A Guide to the Richmond (Va.) Health and Medical Records, 1809-1866

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History

Processed by: T. Harter

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Descriptive Summary

Collection Number

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Language

English

Creator

Richmond (Va.) Circuit Court

Extent

.225cf

Repository

The Library of Virginia

Administrative Information

Access Restrictions

There are no restrictions.

Use Restrictions

There are no restrictions.

Acquisition Information

This collection came to the Library of Virginia in a transfer of court papers from Richmond circuit court; largely from Hustings court records, accession number 52743.

Preferred Citation

Richmond (Va.) Health and Medical Records, 1809-1866. Local government records collection, Richmond Court Records, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

Adjunct Descriptive Data

Related Material

Additional city of Richmond records can be found on microfilm and in the Chancery Records Index at the Library of Virginia. Consult ["A Guide to Virginia County and City Records on Microfilm"](#) and [The Chancery Records Index](#).

Historical Information

Mental Health Records may consist of a variety of documents that historically were referred to as lunacy papers in the courthouses of Virginia localities and municipalities.

See also: Fiduciary Records. A fiduciary is an individual who enters into a confidential and legal relationship which binds them to act on behalf of another. Guardians are legally invested to take care of another person, and of the property and rights of that person. Thus, some records referred to as insanity papers are housed with fiduciary records and not with mental health records.

During its session begun in November 1769, the House of Burgesses passed an act establishing a hospital in Williamsburg for the mentally ill. The Eastern Lunatic Asylum (now Eastern State Hospital) was the first institution in America constructed as a mental hospital. The first patients were admitted in October 1773.

By 1792, Virginia's General Assembly enacted very strict laws governing the practice of inoculation. The new act required a license from the county court to administer vaccinations. It also included a penalty of \$1,500 or six months' imprisonment for anyone willfully spreading smallpox in a manner other than that specified by the act.

The city of Richmond, located between Henrico and Chesterfield Counties, was named by William Byrd (1674-1744), who envisioned the development of a city at the falls of the James River and with the help of William Mayo laid out the town in 1737. The name probably came from the English borough of Richmond upon Thames, which Byrd visited on several occasions. Richmond was established in 1742 and in 1779 was designated the capital of Virginia effective 30 April 1780. It was incorporated as a town, although "stiled the city of Richmond," in 1782 and was incorporated as a city in 1842. It served as the capital of the Confederacy from mid-1861 to April 1865. Richmond was enlarged by the annexation of Manchester (or South Richmond) in 1910, and by the addition of Barton Heights, Fairmount, and Highland Park in 1914. Further annexations from Chesterfield County occurred in 1942 and 1970.

Scope and Content

Richmond (Va.) Health and Medical Records 1809-1866, consist of four folders of Mental Health Records, 1814-1866, and one folder of Smallpox Epidemic Records, 1809-1831.

Mental Health Records, 1814-1866, may include warrants, orders, petitions, depositions, reports, etc. for or by justices of the peace and others regarding the mental condition of individuals who were released to the recognizance of a family member or who were recommended to be committed to a mental hospital, including women and free people of color of both genders. Fiduciary records such as estate inventories of a person judged insane may also be present. Some estate accounts reference named or unnamed enslaved persons. Sheriff's returns and jailer reports include names and conditions of mentally ill prisoners, and may contain references to overcrowding of mental hospital at Williamsburg and overextended use of the jail as holding place for the mentally ill.

This includes a "lunacy record," 1811 of Christopher McPherson, a free Black man, noting him to be of "unsound mind." Papers include a description of McPherson's estate which includes two enslaved individuals.

Smallpox Epidemic Records, 1809-1931, consist of papers relating to quarantines and hospitals for the containment and/or treatment of smallpox outbreaks in the city of Richmond, especially among the city's poor. Papers include city magistrates' minutes, mayor's reports and correspondence related to occurrences in the local poorhouse, a false alarm aboard a vessel in Rockett's Landing, a diagnosis in the county jail within the Richmond city limits, and varioloid breakout cases ostensibly traced to the home of William

Hardie.

Arrangement

The Mental Health Records are arranged chronologically, then alphabetically by last name of individual; the Smallpox Epidemic Records are arranged chronologically.

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