

A Guide to the Charles City County (Va.) Criminal Records, 1802-1869

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A Collection in the Library of Virginia 0007816964
Library of Virginia
2023

History

Processed by: Library Staff

Title Statement

A Guide to the Charles City County (Va.) Criminal Records, 1802-1869

Subtitle: Charles City County (Va.) Criminal Records

Collection: 0007816964

Author: Mary Ann Mason

Publication Statement

Date: © 2023 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 Mary Ann Mason, 31 May 2023

Language Usage: Description is in English

Descriptive Summary

Barcode number

0007816964

Language

English

Collector

Charles City County (Va.) Circuit Court

Physical Characteristics

.45 Cubic Feet (1 box).

Location

Library of Virginia

Repository

Library of Virginia

Administrative Information

Access Restrictions

Commonwealth Causes, 1802-1863, involving enslaved and free Black individuals 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

These Records came to the Library of Virginia in an undated transfer of court papers from Charles City County.

Processing Information

Encoded by M. Mason, 2023.

Commonwealth Causes, 1802-1869, pertaining to enslaved and free Black individuals were removed from the Charles City (Va.) Ended Causes and then processed by Library Staff as a distinct unit. Commonwealth Causes, 1802-1863, then by E. Swain for the purposes of digitizing them for the digital project Virginia Untold: The African American Narrative. All other commonwealth causes, 1802-1869 pertaining to white and non-Black individuals as well as all post-1863 commonwealth causes are still unprocessed and filed with the Charles City (Va.) Ended Causes.

Preferred Citation

Charles City County (Va.) Criminal Records, 1802-1869. Local government records collection, Charles City County Court Records. The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Va. 23219.

Adjunct Descriptive Data

Related Material

See Also: [Charles City County \(Va.\) Ended Causes, 1760-1897](#)

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

Additional Charles City 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."](#)

Charles City County (Va.) is one of Virginia's Lost Records Localities. Additional Charles City County (Va.) Court Records may be found in the [Lost Records Localities Digital Collection](#) on the Library of Virginia website.

Historical Information

Context for Record Type: Commonwealth causes are criminal court cases filed by the state government that consist primarily of warrants, summons, subpoenas, indictments, recognizances, and verdicts handed down by juries and other legal authorities in order to prosecute individuals who violated the penal code.

The commonwealth causes reveal an inconsistency in forms of conviction and punishment for white versus Black and multiracial individuals. Throughout the early nineteenth century, Virginia legislators revised the laws in ways that reduced the legal status of free Black and multiracial people to that of enslaved, thereby creating a legal system based on race. White Virginians and legislators feared insurrection and passed laws restricting the number of Black and multiracial people allowed to gather in groups. Enslavers could be fined for permitting their enslaved people to hire themselves out for work and enslaved people were jailed on these occasions. While public whipping originated as a form of punishment for all those convicted, in Virginia, it was retained for those who were Black, free or enslaved, and officially outlawed as a punishment for white criminals in 1848. Often, Black individuals served much longer penitentiary sentences while the cases of white men, who had committed the same or similar crimes, were dismissed.

The documents that frequently appear in criminal records include warrants that were issued by grand juries, judges, and justices of the peace directing law enforcement officials to either arrest and imprison a person suspected of having committed a crime or to cause an individual to appear in court to answer accusations made against them. Peace warrants directing an offender to "keep the peace of the Commonwealth" or to restrain from any violent acts are commonly found in assault and battery cases. They also contain summonses, used to call a suspected person, witness, or victim(s) to appear in court, and indictments (sometimes called presentments) are the official, written description of the crime that an accused individual is suspected of committing, which is approved by a grand jury and presented to a court in order to begin legal proceedings. Criminal record additionally include verdicts are the formal pronouncements made by

juries on issues submitted to them by a judge or other law enforcement official. In the case of a guilty verdict, a judge will sentence the offender.

Locality History: Charles City County was formed in 1634. It was one of the eight original shires of Virginia.

Lost Locality Note: Records have been destroyed at various times. The most damage occurred during the Civil War when the records were strewn through the woods in a rainstorm. A few pre-Civil War volumes such as deed books, will books, minute books, and order books exist.

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.

The Library of Virginia will at times choose to retain original language in collection descriptions to preserve historical accuracy or to document context. Historical terms and phrases are indicated by the use of quotation marks to differentiate between language taken from a historical source and the language generated by Library of Virginia staff. Examples: Organizational names, titles, place names, and personally chosen identifiers.

Charles City County (Va.) Criminal Records, 1802-1869, consists largely of commonwealth causes involving free and enslaved Black individuals heard in the Charles City (Va.) County Court where the defendants themselves are either free or enslaved Black individuals. These cases also consist of white defendants who are charged with crimes involving matters of chattel slavery; violence against a free or enslaved Black persons; or other violations of laws involving the policing of Black communities.

Causes commonly found against free Black and enslaved people might include breaking and entering, stealing, assault, murder, arson, and aiding enslaved people to self-emancipate. Formerly enslaved men and women could also be tried for remaining in the commonwealth more than one year following emancipation. There are also cases against enslavers who permitted a gathering of enslaved people on their property.

Causes, 1866-1869, contain material relating to Black individuals after the Civil War, but may contain references to prior legal status as enslaved or free.

The box contains additional material including Peace bonds and Peace Warrants, 1815; certificate, 1825, concerning Isham Tazewell, a "runaway" enslaved man; and several criminal records not related to either free or enslaved individuals.

Arrangement

This collection is arranged chronologically