

Certificate of Vessel Inspection under the Act of March 17, 1856

Certificate of Vessel Inspection under the Act of March 17, 1856

June 15, 1858

Title Statement

Certificate of Vessel Inspection under the Act of March 17, 1856Certificate of Vessel Inspection under the Act of March 17, 1856MSS 16967

Author: Ellen Welch

Publication Statement

Publisher: Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library

Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library

P.O. Box 400110

University of Virginia

Charlottesville, Virginia 22904-4110

URL: <https://small.library.virginia.edu/>

06-15-26

This record is made available under an Universal 1.0 Public Domain Dedication Creative Commons license.

Profile Description

Creation: This finding aid was produced using ArchivesSpace on 2026-06-17 11:01:05 +0000.

Language Usage: Description is written in: English, Latin script.

Descriptive Rules: Describing Archives: A Content Standard

Descriptive Summary

Unit ID

MSS 16967

Unit ID

[Archival Resource Key](#)

Unit ID

/repositories/3/resources/1924

Unit Date

June 15, 1858

Mixed Materials [X032762951]

1 (folder)

Language

English

source

Auger Down Books

Extent

.03 Cubic Feet 1 letter folder

Repository

Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library

Administrative Information

Conditions Governing Access

This collection is open for research.

Immediate Source of Acquisition

This collection was a purchase from Auger Down Books to the Small Special Collections Library at the University of Virginia Library on 6 May 2026.

Preferred Citation

MSS 16967, Certificate of Vessel Inspection under the Act of March 17, 1856, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia Library.

Biographical / Historical

Passed on March 17, 1856, the Act "providing additional protection for the slave property of citizens of this commonwealth" was a strict Virginia law designed to prevent enslaved people from escaping via maritime routes. It required rigorous inspections of vessels leaving Virginia ports, generating certificates of inspection as part of a state-level initiative to combat the Underground Railroad

The legislation, passed by the General Assembly, responded to growing anxieties about enslaved people seeking freedom from captivity in Tidewater Virginia. Vessels were inspected to ensure no enslaved people were hidden aboard, and records of these inspections were filed, creating a maritime register of over 13,000 vessels.

Penalties and Rewards: The law imposed harsh penalties on free African Americans assisting escapees (5-10 year prison sentences) and provided \$100 rewards for capturing fugitives on ships. Duration: These inspections were active from 1856 until Virginia seceded from the Union in 1861.

Content Description

This collection contains one official certificate issued under the Virginia law of March 17, 1856, aimed at preventing the escape of enslaved individuals from ports "for the better protection of slave property in this Commonwealth." It recorded the inspection of a vessel prior to departure, authorized inspectors to search vessels and detain them if necessary, and offered monetary rewards for those who captured freedom seekers.

This certificate, headed "State of Virginia, To-wit," certifies the schooner "Schr. Vandavi" of "Richland," whereof Jos. H. Brice is Master, "was duly inspected by me this 15 day of June 1858 and no cause for detention found." It is signed by Inspector Jas. H. Skinner and attested by the Chief Inspector.

The document reflects the operation of Virginia's 1856 statute, which required the inspection of vessels suspected of carrying enslaved persons seeking to escape via maritime routes. The law had been passed under pressure from enslavers, the most severe of many similar laws enacted in previous decades, amid increasing fears of Underground Railroad activity. The law mandated

Keywords

Slavery--United States--History--19th Century

Slavery--United States -- Virginia

Auger Down Books