

A Guide to the Pleasants family Papers, 1745-1898

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A Collection in the Library of Virginia 41008
Library of Virginia
2004

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History

Processed by: Renee M. Savits

Title Statement

A Guide to the Pleasants family Papers, 1745-1898

Subtitle: Pleasants family Papers, 1745-1898

Collection: 41008

Author: Renee M. Savits

Publication Statement

File size: 3 KB

Date: © 2004 By the Library of Virginia. All rights reserved.

Publisher: Library of Virginia

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Profile Description

Creation: Machine-readable finding aid derived from MARC record, created by Renee M. Savits, 16 July 2004

Language Usage: Description is in English

Revision Description

2013-11-21 Converted to schema conforming EAD by dtd2schema.vh.xsl.

Descriptive Summary

Accession number

41008

Language

English

Collector

Robert Alonzo Brock

Physical Characteristics

Miscellaneous reels 4238-4241

Repository

Administrative Information

Access Restrictions

Collection is open to research.

Use Restrictions

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Acquisition Information

The Robert Alonzo Brock Collection was filmed by The Huntington Library in cooperation with The Library of Virginia with funding provided by The Library of Virginia Foundation with the support of The Roller- Bottimore Foundation and The Robins Foundation. Microfilm received 15 April 2004.

Preferred Citation

Pleasants family Papers, 1745-1898, Robert Alonzo Brock Collection, Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

Adjunct Descriptive Data

Location of Originals

Originals are located at the Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

Biographical/Historical Information

The Pleasants family were a prominent Virginia Quaker family with lands on the Upper James River. John Pleasants (d. 1698) emigrated from England and settled in Henrico County, Virginia, around 1665. He converted to Quakerism and was an active and prominent member of the church, donating land to the church, the Curles Meeting House, and filing petitions and reports to the authorities on behalf of the Society of Friends. He married Jane (Larcome) Tucker, widow of Samuel Tucker, in 1670.

John Pleasants, II (1671-1714), was the son of John and Jane Pleasants. He married Dorothy Cary, daughter of Thomas and Ann (Milner) Cary, in 1694.

His second son, John Pleasants III (1697-1771), also a Quaker, amassed a fortune in land and slaves, but in later life he advocated the abolition of slavery. In his last will, 11 August 1771, he requested that his slaves be emancipated. He married three times, first to Margaret Jordan (b. 1699), daughter of Robert Jordan and his first wife Mary (Belson) Jordan. In 1750 he married Mary Woodson, daughter of Tarleton and Judith (Fleming) Woodson. Finally he married Miriam Hunnicutt, widow of Glaister Hunnicutt.

Robert Pleasants (1723-1810), second son of John and Margaret Pleasants, was born at "Curles" Plantation, Henrico County, Virginia. He was a staunch Quaker, zealous agitator against slavery, and the first president of the Abolition Society of Virginia, established in 1790. In 1782 he successfully lobbied for the Manumission Act and in 1792 sent a petition to the U.S. Congress from the Virginia Abolition Society calling for the end to the slave trade. He went to court repeatedly to free hundreds of slaves. In 1784 Robert founded the Gravelly Hill School, the first school for free blacks in Virginia, and set aside 350 acres of land to maintain the schools.

Samuel Pleasants (1737-1807), also a son of John and Margaret Pleasants, was born at "Curles" Plantation. At the age of twenty five, he moved to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and established himself as a merchant. He married Mary Pemberton (1738-1821) in 1762. He was also active in the abolitionist movement. In 1777, Samuel Pleasants, along with several of his brothers-in-law and other prominent Quakers, were arrested and imprisoned as "Torries" because they refused to bear arms. General George Washington intervened and personally signed an order for their release.

James Pleasants (1769-1836), served as Governor of Virginia, 1822-1825. His son, John Hampden Pleasants (1797-1846), founded the Richmond Whig newspaper. He married Ann Elizabeth Irvin and Mary Massie. He was killed on 27 February 1846 in a duel with Thomas Ritchie, Jr., owner of rival newspaper the Richmond Enquirer.

Scope and Content

Papers, 1745-1898, of the Pleasants family of Goochland and Henrico Counties and Richmond, Virginia. Includes accounts, bonds, correspondence, estate appraisals, minutes, promissory notes, receipts, slave manumissions, and wills. Includes papers on several generations of the Pleasants family, focusing mostly on Robert Pleasants (1723-1801).

Of note are the papers of Robert Pleasants, a zealous Quaker and abolitionist. Included is correspondence with noted Philadelphia abolitionists concerning the slave trade in England, slavery in the United States, abolitionist societies, and politics in the United States. Correspondents include Anthony Benezet, Robert Bolling, John B. Crenshaw, Nathaniel Crenshaw, Micajah Crew, James Lyons, James Pemberton, William D. Shipman, John Smith, and Daniel Thomas. Included is a letter, c. 1790, written to Patrick Henry and the Council of Virginia, asking for help to free Pleasants' slaves and inviting Henry to join the Society of Friends.

Of note is a petition, 1773, of Philadelphia citizens to the Representatives of the Province of Pennsylvania, asking for the abolishment of the slave trade. Also of note is a petition, 27 December 1774, sent to King George III, from Robert Bolling, regarding the slave trade. Also included are papers relating to the lawsuit, Pleasants vs. Pleasants, 1798, in which Robert went to court to sue his relatives in order to free hundreds of slaves that were illegally held in bondage after being freed by the will of his father, John Pleasants.

Robert Pleasants was very involved with the Society of Friends and included are many records relating to the organization. Included are accounts, epistles, membership lists, minutes, and reports, c. 1749- 1816, from the Society of Friends of Virginia. Included are papers from meetings in Henrico County and Caroline County (known as the Upper Quarterly Meeting), Cedar Creek (Richmond) Monthly Meeting and its parent West River (Baltimore) Meeting, as well as Ohio, New England, and Philadelphia Yearly Meetings. Included are bills to repair the Friends house in Richmond on Main Street (1797); lists of books bought; and a history of various monthly meetings in Virginia, 1739-1760. Also of note are accounts of marriage ceremonies at the Cedar Creek meeting house. Includes marriage information on the Cobbs, George, Ladd, Ratcliff, and Terrell families. Of note is a Book of Discipline Revised and Established by the Yearly Meeting of Virginia, held in Charles City County, Virginia, 1801. This book contains a proposal to establish a school for free slaves by Robert Pleasants. Also of note is a letter to the Indians of the Seneca Nation, from the Philadelphia Society of Friends, 1879, regarding education of the children.

Family letters relate to land holdings, mercantile and business interests and family affairs. Included are estate accounts and wills of Henriette Pleasants Bates (d. 1812), John Bates (d. 1821), John Pleasants (d. 1771), Richard Pleasants (d. 1800), Robert Pleasants (1723-1801), and Thomas Pleasants (d. 1804) . Also included are memorial addresses for Henrietta Pleasants Bates (d. 1812), Margaret Pleasants (d. 1806), Sarah Pleasants (d. 1810), and William Henry Pleasants (d. 1826). Of note are deeds for land in Goochland and Henrico Counties; a survey of land in Henrico County, 1765; poems by William H. Pleasants, 1802- 1820; and the appointment of Thomas S. Pleasants as postmaster, Goochland County, Virginia, 1823. Included are receipts from the Richmond Whig to John Pleasants and a report from the Virginia Freemasons Grand Lodge, 1784.

Also included are slave manumissions, 1776-1781, by Mary Pleasants, Samuel Pleasants, and Thomas Pleasants. These manumissions include the name and age of the slaves and have been cataloged separately. (See LVA Acc. 41327).