

A Guide to the Petersburg (Va.) Commonwealth Causes Ended, 1786-1938 (bulk 1823-1859)

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A Collection in the Library of Virginia 1152181-1152187, 0007807132-0007807140, 1046884, 1046930, 1046931, 1046936, 1046937, 1046960, 1046994, 1046995, 1047005, 1047007, 1047035, 1047082, 1183604, 1183605

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Descriptive Summary

Barcode numbers

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Language

English

Collector

Petersburg (Va.) Circuit Court

Physical Characteristics

16 boxes

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 a transfer of court papers from the city of Petersburg under the accession number 37622.

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Adjunct Descriptive Data

Related Material

Additional court records for Petersburg can be found on microfilm at the Library of Virginia. Consult ["A Guide to Virginia County and City Records on Microfilm."](#)

Historical Information

Petersburg was formed from parts of Dinwiddie, Prince George, and Chesterfield counties. A garrison and fur trading post called Fort Henry was established in 1645 on the site of the Indian village of Appamattuck. The present name, suggested in 1733 by William Byrd II, honors Peter Jones, Byrd's companion on expeditions into the Virginia backcountry. Petersburg was established in 1748 and incorporated as a town in 1784. In the latter year the towns of Blandford, Pocahontas, and Ravenscroft were added to Petersburg. It was incorporated as a city in 1850. Petersburg was enlarged by annexation from both Prince George and Dinwiddie counties in 1972.

Scope and Content

Petersburg (Va.) Commonwealth Causes Ended, 1786-1938 (bulk 1823-1859) are criminal court cases and consist primarily of warrants, summons, indictments, and verdicts handed down by grand juries and other legal authorities in order to prosecute individuals who violated the penal code. These offenses ranged in severity from murder, rape, assault and battery, and larceny to tax evasion and slander. Criminal offenders and victims who appear in cases prior to the abolition of slavery in Virginia in 1865 included both free and enslaved persons.

Warrants 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.

Summons were used to call a suspected person to appear in court. A summons could also be issued to direct witnesses or victims to come before the court in order to provide evidence or information deemed pertinent to a case.

An indictment is 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. Due to this process, indictments are often referred to as "presentments."

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. Sentences may

include a fine, corporal punishment, and/or imprisonment. Coroners also submitted verdicts such as "death by suicide," "death by natural causes," etc. when determining the cause of a suspicious or sudden death.

Arrangement

Boxes 1-7 are arranged chronologically.

Boxes 8-16 contain commonwealth causes pertaining to free and enslaved persons, and are arranged chronologically.

The remaining collection is unprocessed. The commonwealth causes are filed in bundles with other record types such as judgments, tax and fiscal records, and fiduciary records.

Selected Suits of Interest

1806 Apr 1: Commonwealth vs Frank White (enslaved):

Scope and Content

An enslaved man was charged with cohabiting with a white woman as her husband, while also going at large and acting as a free person.

1824 May 13: Commonwealth vs Shadrick Brandon (free):

Scope and Content

A free Black man was charged with stealing a certification of emancipation from another free Black man, who was likely a relative.

1828 Feb: Commonwealth vs James Bolling (free):

Scope and Content

A free Black man was charged with working with a white partner to forge certificates of emancipation. For further information about the forgery of these certificates and their recipients, see also 1827 Oct 14: Commonwealth vs Wager Lanier.

1829 Oct 17: Commonwealth vs Robert Crook alias Bob Crook (free):

Scope and Content

A free Black man faced criminal charges for fathering an illegitimate child, and was sentenced to give duty for payment for the next five years.

1830 Jan 28: Commonwealth vs Cornelius (enslaved):

Scope and Content

An enslaved man was sentenced to be executed for burglary, but was saved by a pardon from the Governor of Virginia.

1834 Jul 7: Commonwealth vs Lilly (enslaved):

Scope and Content

An enslaved woman was accused of attempting to murder her enslaver's daughter because she had given the infant a large dose of laudanum, even though this was a widely used and accepted sleep aid for infants at the time.

1835 Jan: Commonwealth vs William Mawberry etc.:

Scope and Content

A group of white men were charged with suspicion of violence because they were frequently seen spending time in the company of enslaved people. See also 1834: Commonwealth vs Samuel Martin etc., where a group of white men were similarly deemed "suspicious persons" because they frequently spent time in the company of free Black men.

1835 Jul: Commonwealth vs Malinda (enslaved):

Scope and Content

An enslaved woman was accused of attempting to murder her enslaver and his family.

1835 Jul 22: Commonwealth vs Solomon Anderson (free):

Scope and Content

A free Black man petitioned for a writ of error after his criminal case was adjourned, on the grounds that he had been incorrectly tried and convicted as an enslaved man.

1837 Aug: Commonwealth vs Peggy (free):

Scope and Content

A free Black woman was charged with unlawfully remaining in the Commonwealth for more than twelve months after her emancipation, and argued that she should be considered an exception to this law because she was an infant at the time of her emancipation.

1838 Nov 14: Commonwealth vs John Lloyd:

Scope and Content

A white man was found to be illegally detaining and abusing a free Black man, who had initially been hired out to his service in order to pay for jail fees. Accusers were the brother and other family members of the free Black man, who petitioned for a writ of habeas corpus on his behalf.

1843 May: Commonwealth vs Alexander R. Price:

Scope and Content

A white man was tried and convicted of carrying away a free Black person as an enslaved person after a free Black woman accused him of kidnapping her infant child for this purpose.

1848 Oct: Commonwealth vs William Rutland etc.:

Scope and Content

A group of white men attacked a free Black man in his home, attempting to kill him and destroying much of his personal property, because the man had refused to give them a portion of the oysters that he had been collecting.

1849 Sep: Commonwealth vs Emmeline Butcher (free):

Scope and Content

A free Black woman was accused of murdering her employer's infant daughter. The child's mother insisted that the death was deliberate, despite all other witnesses agreeing that it was the result of an accidental overdose of laudanum given as a sleeping aid.

1857 Jun: Commonwealth vs Charles E. Taylor:

Scope and Content

A white man was charged with shooting and attempting to kill an enslaved man in a public street. He was acquitted for the crime despite the testimony of numerous witnesses. See also the later case of 1857 Jul: Commonwealth vs Charles E. Taylor, wherein he was also charged for disturbing the peace with this shooting, but was similarly found to be not guilty.