

A Guide to the Henrico County (Va.) Commonwealth Causes related to Gabriel's Insurrection, 1800 September-November

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A Collection in the Library of Virginia

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History

Processed by: Sarah Nerney

Title Statement

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Profile Description

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

Descriptive Summary

Language

English

Collector

Henrico County (Va.) Circuit Court.

Physical Characteristics

.23 cubic feet (1 box)

Location

Library of Virginia

Repository

The Library of Virginia

Administrative Information

Access Restrictions

[IN PROCESS]Commonwealth Causes related to Gabriel's Insurrection, 1800, 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 a transfer of court papers from Henrico County in an undated accession.

Processing Information

Commonwealth Causes related to Gabriel's Insurrection, 1800 September-November, were removed from the larger Henrico County (Va.) Judgments and Ended Causes. These records were processed by S. Nerney around 2012 and later indexed by L. Neuroth and K. McGrail for the purposes of digitizing them for the digital project Virginia Untold: The African American Narrative. Additional Henrico commonwealth causes remain unprocessed in the Henrico County (Va.) Judgments and Ended Causes.

Commonwealth causes concerning insurrections other than Gabriel's that were previously filed with these cases are now filed:

Commonwealth vs. Arthur (1802 May) in Henrico County (Va.) Judgments and Ended Causes, barcode 1118211

Commonwealth vs. Ben and Commonwealth vs. Isaac (1806 May) in Henrico County (Va.) Judgments and Ended Causes, barcode 1118229.

Encoded by S. Nerney, 2013; Updated by M. Mason and K. McGrail, July 2024

Preferred Citation

Henrico County (Va.) Commonwealth Causes related to Gabriel's Insurrection, 1800 September-November. Local government records collection, Henrico County Court Records. The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia 23219.

Adjunct Descriptive Data

Related Material

See also: [Henrico County \(Va.\) Free and Enslaved Records, 1789-1865](#)

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

Additional Henrico 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.](#)"

Historical Information

Historical Information: Gabriel's Insurrection was a large scale rebellion planned for the fall of 1800 by Gabriel, a blacksmith enslaved by Thomas Henry Prosser, a white man, of Henrico County, along with group of enslaved Black men. A heavy rainstorm postponed the plot which aimed to take Richmond, hold the governor hostage, and bargain for the freedom of all Black and multiracial individuals held in chattel slavery. After the storm, two enslaved persons informed, Mosby Sheppard, their enslaver, about the impending rebellion. Sheppard warned the governor, who marshaled the white community by use of the militia, and the courts to root out and punish the Gabriel and the other organizers. After first escaping, Gabriel was captured on a schooner in Norfolk, Va. and returned to Henrico for trial. The end result of the trials were that twenty six enslaved Black people were executed, including Gabriel and his brothers Solomon and Martin. Others were convicted but pardoned; several were sold out of state.

Fears of an even more widespread rebellion haunted white Virginians for years to come. Gabriel and his fellow organizers recruited participants at religious meeting and other social gatherings in Richmond, Va. and

at plantations in the surrounding. Gabriel successfully met and communicated with so many other enslaved individuals due to the relative absence of policing of Black movement between city and county. Enslaved individuals ran errands for their enslavers and enslavers hired out those they enslaved to other white residents, resulting in fluid spheres of Black and multiracial community. After Gabriel's rebellion was discovered and until the close of the Civil War, the General Assembly passed a myriad of laws aimed at restricting the movement, assembly, and education of free and enslaved Black and multiracial individuals within the state's borders. Most of the laws were aimed at controlling and policing these populations so as to reduce the chance of future revolts and maintain a white system of power.

Context for Record Type: Oyer and terminer, from the French word meaning "to hear and determine," refers to a type of court process reserved for special circumstances. Historically in Virginia, these special circumstances were the prosecution of enslaved people. An oyer and terminer tribunal denied an enslaved defendant the usual legal proceedings applied to a white defendant. Instead of a trial by jury, a panel was organized to "examine, judge, and pass sentence on slave defendants."

A guilty verdict had no appeal process and conviction many times condemned the defendant to execution. This trial system left enslaved people taken to court with little protection against racial prejudice, extreme punishment, and errors in the collection or interpretation of evidence.

Locality History Note: Henrico County was named for Henry, Prince of Wales, the oldest son of James I. It was one of the eight original shires established in 1634.

Scope and Content

Henrico County (Va.) Commonwealth Causes related to Gabriel's Insurrection, 1800 September-November, consist principally of the information filed in the criminal cases brought in the county in the court of oyer and terminer against sixty-two enslaved Black individuals charged with participation in the planning of a rebellion to be held in Henrico County and the city of Richmond against white systems of power that imposed chattel slavery. The information contains the name of the enslaved individual, the name of the enslaver and their county of residence, the charges, and the names of witnesses on whose evidence the charges were brought. A few causes also contain a mittimus charging the sheriff to bring an enslaved person or persons to the jailer, and one suit contains a petition asking that a witness be allowed to give testimony at trial.

Also included is a petition to the county court from citizens asking that the gallows be moved due to the distress the number of executions is causing their family members, and a letter from then governor James Monroe stating that he cannot do anything about the location of the gallows and recommending that they petition the court house officials instead.

Arrangement

This collection is arranged

- Series I: Commonwealth Causes related to Gabriel's Insurrection, 1800, arranged chronologically

Contents List

Series I: Commonwealth Causes related to Gabriel's Insurrection, 1800

Extent

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Physical Location Library of Virginia

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arranged chronologically

Barcode number 7383884: Commonwealth Causes related to Gabriel's Insurrection 1800 September-November