

A Guide to the Rockbridge County (Va.) Clerk's Correspondence (Walter A. Plecker to A. T. Shields) , 1912-1943

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The Library of Virginia

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There are no restrictions.

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Related Material

See also Rockbridge County (Va.) Atha Sorrells by her next friend William Sorrells vs. A. T. Shields, Clerk of Circuit Court, 1925. Local government records collection, Rockbridge County Court Records. The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Va. 23219.

Historical Information

Rockbridge County was named for Natural Bridge, an exceptional rock formation located in the county. The county was formed from Augusta and Botetourt counties in 1778, and another part of Botetourt was added later.

On March 20, 1924, Virginia passed the Racial Integrity Act that recognized only two races, white and colored. The act required that a racial description of every person be recorded at birth, and made marriage between white persons and non-white persons a felony. The law was the most famous ban on miscegenation in the United States, and was overturned by the United States Supreme Court in 1967, in *Loving vs. Virginia*. The registrar of Virginia's Bureau of Vital Statistics, Dr. Walter Ashby Plecker, developed the racial criteria behind the act and adhered strictly to the one-drop rule, a historical colloquial term that holds that a person with any trace of African ancestry is considered black. The Racial Integrity Act was subject to the Pocahontas exception. Since many influential families claimed descent from Pocahontas, the legislature declared that a person could be considered white with as much as one-sixteenth Indian ancestry. This law, along with the Sterilization Act also of 1924, imposed the practice of scientific eugenics in the Commonwealth.

Walter Ashby Plecker, 1861-1947, was a physician and public health advocate who was the first registrar of Virginia's Bureau of Vital Statistics. Plecker graduated from Hoover Military Academy in 1880 and obtained a medical degree from the University of Maryland in 1885. He settled in Hampton, Virginia in 1892, and became its public health officer in 1902. He took an active interest in obstetrics and public health issues, educating midwives, inventing a home incubator, and prescribing home remedies for infants. His efforts are credited with an almost fifty percent decline in birthing deaths for black mothers. From 1912 to 1946, Plecker served as the first registrar of Virginia's newly created Bureau of Vital Statistics. An avowed white supremacist and advocate of eugenics, Plecker believed that the state's Native Americans had been mongrelized with its African American population. A law passed by the state's General Assembly in 1924, The Racial Integrity Act, recognized only two races, white and colored. Plecker believed that colored people were attempting to pass as Indian and obsessively documented each and every birth and marriage registration submitted to his agency. Plecker's policies pressured state agencies to reclassify most citizens claiming Indian identity as colored. This policy has left a modern day legacy where Virginia's Native Americans struggle to achieve federal recognition because they cannot prove their heritage as required by federal laws.

Scope and Content

Rockbridge County (Va.) Clerk's Correspondence (Walter A. Plecker to A. T. Shields), 1912-1943, consists principally of correspondence to the Rockbridge County clerk of the circuit court Abner Terry Shields from Walter Ashby Plecker, head of the Virginia Bureau of Vital Statistics. The correspondence includes Vital Statistics forms and instructions, Virginia Health Bulletins about enforcing the Racial Integrity Law of 1924, a letter to the attorney general asking for clarification of procedures required by the new Racial Integrity Act about issuing marriage licenses, pamphlets about eugenics issued by Plecker and the Bureau of Vital Statistics, lists of families that Plecker considered to be of questionable racial lineage including families of Amherst and Rockbridge counties, specific inquiries from Plecker about individuals he was seeking to prove were non-white, and newspaper articles about court cases challenging the Racial Integrity Law. References exist to the cases of Dorothy Johns and Atha Sorrells who separately challenged the Racial Integrity Law in 1924.

Plecker's obsession with racial integrity is well in evidence in this correspondence. Many of the letters and directives are to the clerk about specific individuals whom he felt were trying to pass as white but were in fact colored and he asks for evidence from the clerk to this end. Plecker also regularly sent out alerts to the clerk about entire family names that he considered suspect. He instructs that these families were not to be allowed to be listed as white in any record or to be treated as white in any way, including attendance at white schools. Evidence that people protested and resisted Plecker's campaign are clear in this correspondence as well.

Index Terms

Corporate Names:

Rockbridge County (Va.). Circuit Court.

Subjects:

African Americans -- Virginia -- Rockbridge County.
Eugenics -- Virginia -- Rockbridge County.
Indians of North America -- Virginia -- Rockbridge County.
Interracial marriage -- Virginia -- Rockbridge County.
Miscegenation -- Virginia -- Rockbridge County.
Public records -- Virginia -- Rockbridge County.

Geographical Names:

Rockbridge County (Va.) -- History -- 20th century.

Genre and Form Terms:

Legal correspondence -- Virginia -- Rockbridge County.
Letters (correspondence) -- Virginia -- Rockbridge County.
Local government records -- Virginia -- Rockbridge County.
Pamphlets -- Virginia -- Rockbridge County.

Added Entry - Personal Name:

Plecker, Walter Ashby, 1861-1867.
Shields, Abner Terry, 1852- .

Arrangement

Arranged chronologically.

