

FOUND IN THE ARCHIVES, no. 80 – November 2022

Common Criers in Fairfax County

Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center



Happy November, and welcome back to *Found in the Archives!* In this month's edition we will discuss court records relating to Common Criers, also known as Town Criers, in Fairfax County's History.

Common Criers have played an important role in Fairfax County's history. Since illiteracy was very common until the mid-twentieth century, information was generally spread by word-of-mouth throughout the county. Criers were employed to call colony and state news, revisions to colonial and state law, and even perform official government functions like crying auctions and estate sales, usually at a town center or

courthouse. Criers were common in towns throughout colonial America, and were still part of Fairfax County society after the American Revolution.

An early example of a crier found in records at the Historic Records Center comes from the 1766 estate account of Josias Mankin, whose estate paid the Constable two shillings and six pence to "cry" Mankin's goods for sale. The estate account separately notes a second payment of two shillings and six pence for the Constable's crying of the sale of an enslaved girl owned by Mankin.

	1163	15. 6. 0
To my Commission on the Estate at 10 ^{pc}		1. 10. 0
		<hr/> 16. 17. 0
To paid the Constable for crying the goods at sale.		2. 6.
To paid 1 ¹ / ₂ Gall. Rum at the said Sale of appraisem ^t a ^d .		0. 9.
To paid S ^r Constable for crying a negroe girl for sale part of said Estate.		2. 6.
		<hr/> 17. 11. 1
To the above Tob ^o . discounte ^d at 25 ^{pc} .		14. 11. 3
		<hr/> 32. 2. 4
Ball ^o due the above Estate.		3. 5. 2
		<hr/> 35. 7. 6

Estate Account of Josias Mankin, Fairfax County Will Book C-1 page 31

While this estate account shows the Constable acting as the crier, in 1852, the Virginia General Assembly passed a law requiring towns of 1,000 residents or more to issue licenses for their common criers.

Who exempt from such licenses.

30. This act shall not be construed to require a license to be obtained by any person to authorize him to sell wood or lumber, cut or sawed by himself, or to follow the business of a common crier, except in a town having a population of 1000 inhabitants or more, or to act as agent **Persons exempt from license tax.**

Acts of the General Assembly, passed in 1852, in the Seventy-Sixth Year of the Commonwealth, General Acts, Part 1, Ch. 12.1, An Act authorizing the issuing of licenses in certain cases, page 11.

After the passage of this act, Fairfax Circuit Court began issuing licenses, evidenced by an 1869 Insolvent License tax list that shows James H. Stoutenburgh did not pay the \$10 tax on his common crier license.

INSOLVENT LICENSES.

A List of all Persons assessed with a License Tax in the District No. _____, of George Bull,
 Commissioner of the Revenue in the County of Fairfax, from the first day of May, 1869, to
 the first day of July, 1869, returned by Franklin Sherman, Sheriff of said county,
 as delinquent for the non-payment of said taxes.

NAME OF THE PERSON OR FIRM.	BUSINESS OR PROFESSION LICENSED.	AMOUNT OF TAX.	WHY RETURNED DELINQUENT.
<u>James H. Stoutenburgh</u>	<u>Common Crier</u>	<u>\$ 10 00</u>	<u>This party has no business out of my County & has no property in this County from which I can make his tax. He has failed to make payment though it has been repeatedly requested.</u>

Fairfax County Insolvent License Taxes, 1869 (Unprocessed)

The Historic Records Center also has two notes in our collection that show the appointment of Common Criers. In 1885, R. F. Broadwater was appointed “Crier of this County,” and in 1886 James W. Burke was appointed “Crier of this Court.” The distinction between the two is uncertain; however, one possible explanation is that with the creation of the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors in 1870, the County Government was separate from the County Court for the first time. With this distinction, perhaps there was one crier appointed to work for the Board of Supervisors and cry county news and governing decisions, and one crier who worked for the court, crying sales to recover debts in court cases.

R. F. Broadwater is appointed &
~~Sworn~~ Crier of this County & qualified
as such by taking the oath prescribed
by law.

Excerpt from Fairfax Term Papers 1884-025, Public Servants Accounts: "R. F. Broadwater is appointed Crier of this County & qualified as such by taking the oath prescribed by law."

James W. Burke is admitted &
sworn in as Crier of this Court.
on the motion of George E.
Sangster. Shff. Over!

Excerpt from Fairfax Term Papers 1886-313, Miscellaneous orders: "James W. Burke is admitted & sworn in as Crier of this Court on the motion of George E. Sangster, Shff [Sheriff]."

With literacy now the norm, Fairfax no longer utilizes a Common Crier, and advances in technology make information more accessible than ever. It is important to remember, however, that criers were once vital to the spread of news and information in 18th and 19th century Fairfax County.

For more information on these and other records held at the Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center, please call 703-246-4168 or email CCRHistoricRecords@fairfaxcounty.gov.

The Historic Records Center is open to both walk-ins and appointments. You can make a research appointment by calling 703-246-4168.

Tours of the 1799 Historic Fairfax Courthouse are given every Friday at 3 pm. Please meet Historic Records Center staff at the green doors of the 1799 Courthouse for the start of the tour.

Sign up for *Found in the Archives*, the monthly newsletter of the HRC:

<https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/circuit/historic-records-center>