

FOUND IN THE ARCHIVES, no. 86 – May 2023

Embellishments!

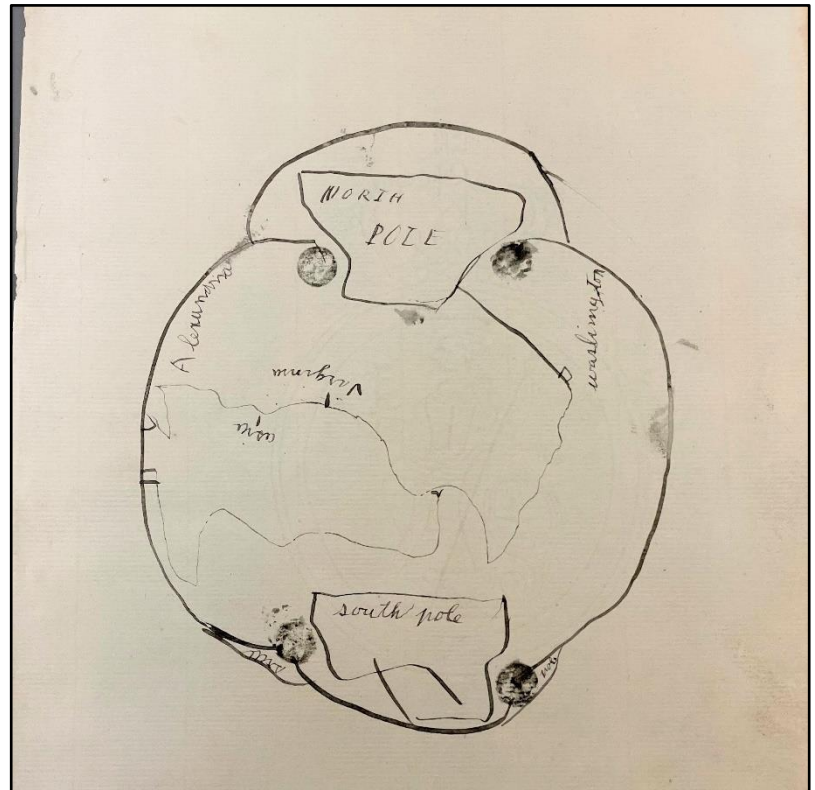
Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center



Happy May, and welcome back to *Found in the Archives!* In our January 2020 edition we discussed doodles and drawings found in court records here at the Historic Records Center. This month, we are following up with even more embellishments and free-hand drawings we come across in our records. While defacing court records is a crime in Virginia, we have inherited record groups that were doodled on during the 1700s and 1800s, which reveal the time and temperament of the era.

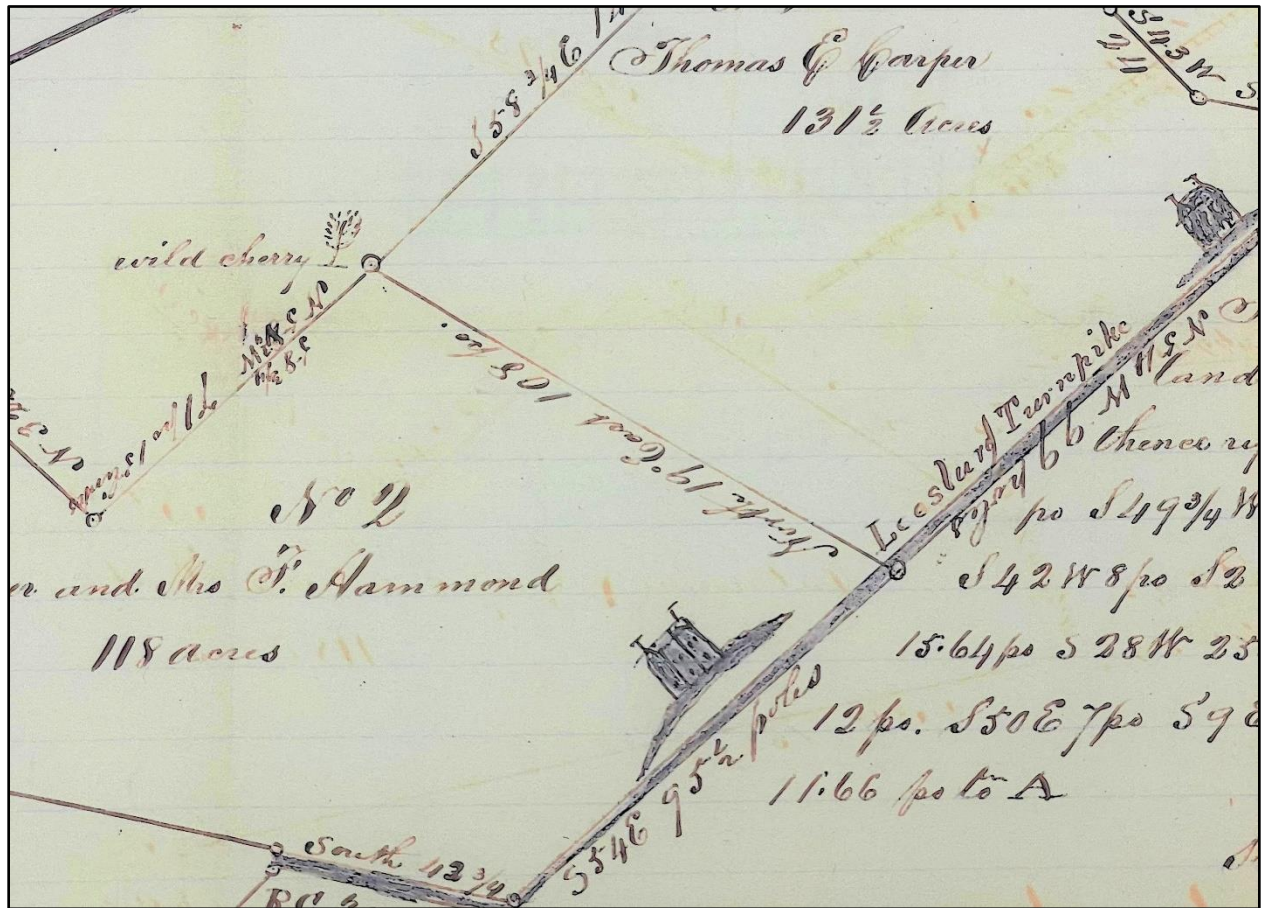
While fascinating for public historians to study, drawings on historic court records provide valuable insight to how figures of the past saw the world – literally! Our Estray Book, dating from 1784 to 1828, contains claims made by citizens who have lost livestock or animals in Fairfax County. However, the first pages of this book before the listings begin feature a large and unique doodle.

It features the North and South Pole, Virginia, China, Alexandria, and Washington. While this map may have just been a fun doodle for whoever drew it, to us it shows how differently we view the world today because of the vast technological advancements (like GIS and



Fairfax County Estray Book 1784-1828

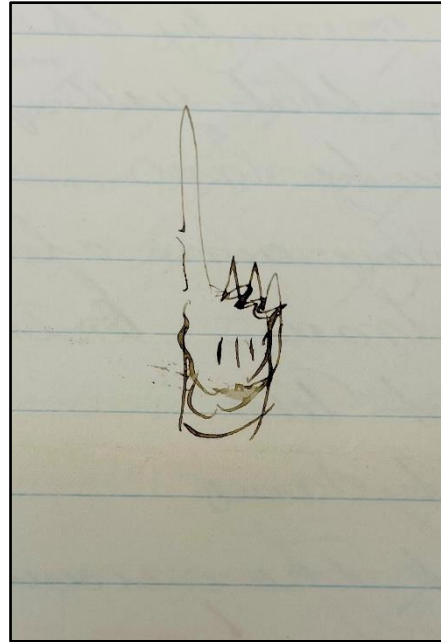
other satellite imaging) that make information, mapping, and geolocation more precise and consumable.



Excerpt from Fairfax County Drawer X X-I-0146

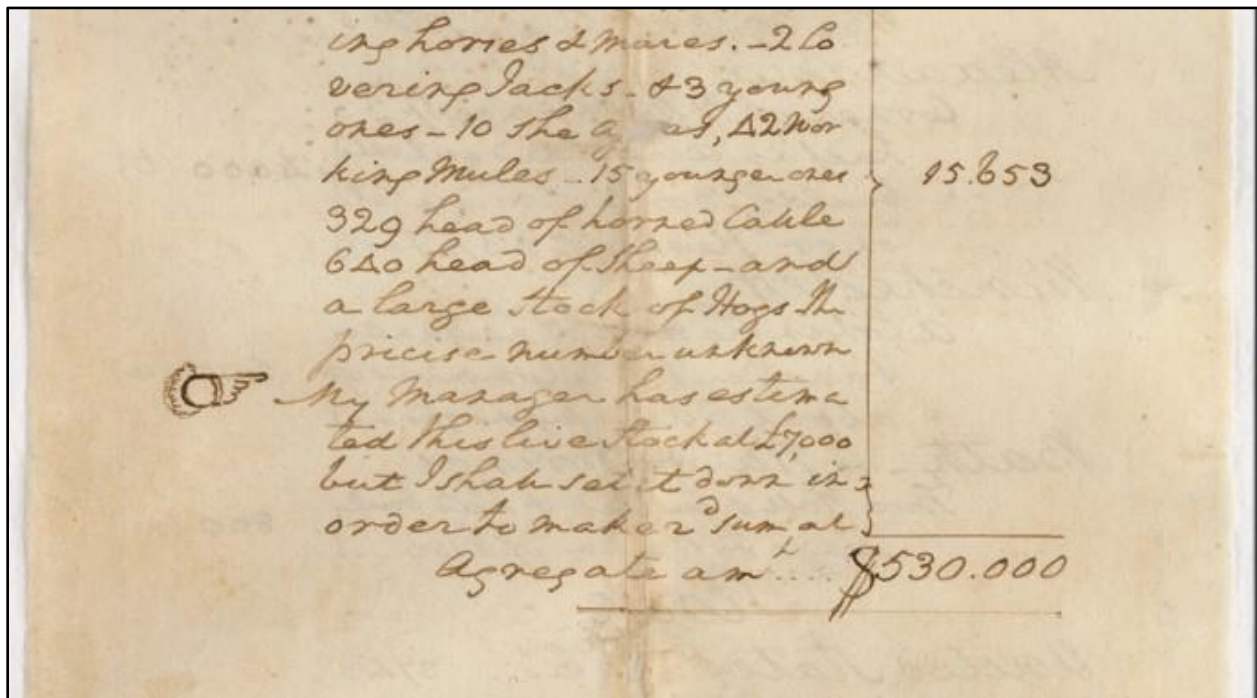
Drawings in court records also could have legitimate and relevant purposes for the case, and were not necessarily done just for fun. This plat, for an area near modern-day Sterling, accompanies a land partition from 1877 and includes drawings of a "Wild Cherry" tree and two homes, intended to mark where these were located in relation to boundaries being drawn.

Another doodle with a purpose is this drawing of a hand found in a chancery case from 1881. Instead of drawing arrows or writing “turn over” it was common practice in the 18th and 19th centuries to draw a hand pointing to indicate to turn the page, or to single out an important piece of information.



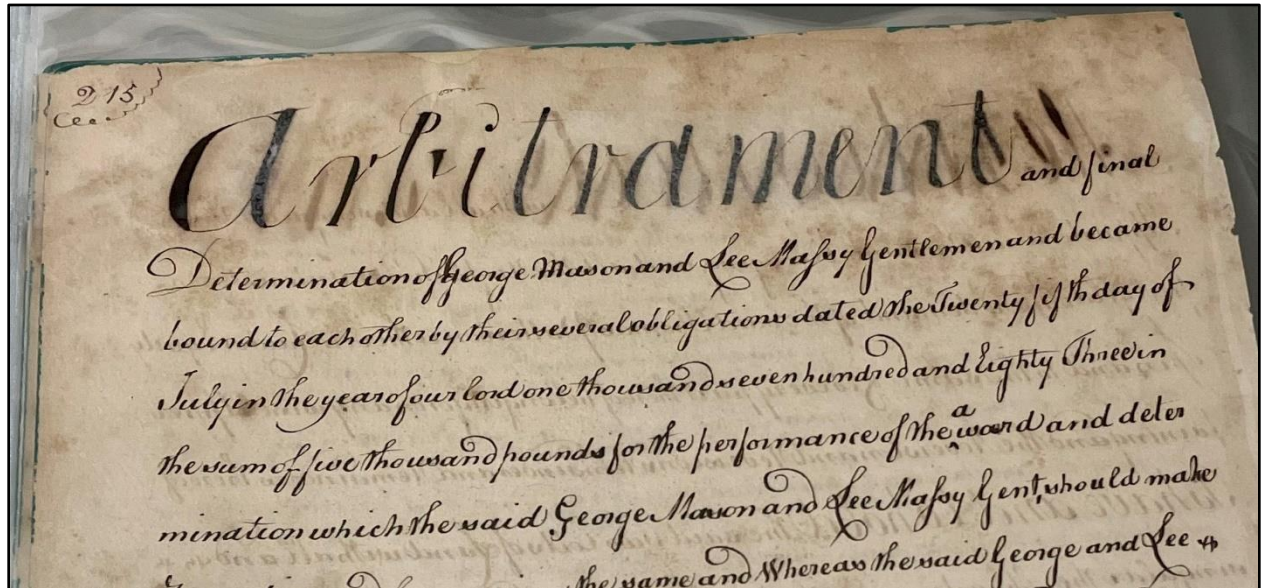
Excerpt from Fairfax County
Chancery Case 1881-040

A famous example of the *hand as a direction indicator* can be seen in one of the Historic Records Center’s more well-known records, George Washington’s Will. The property schedule portion of Washington’s will features a drawn hand pointing to a specific sentence about his manager. See image below.

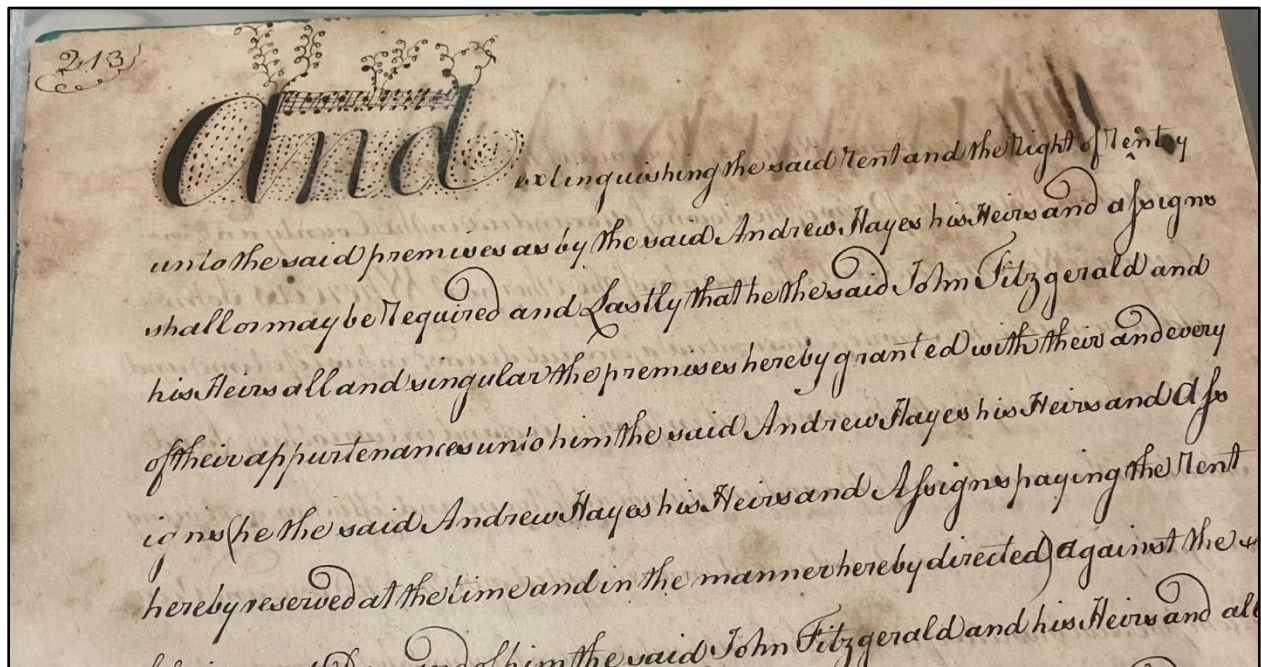


Excerpt from George Washington’s Will, Property Schedule section

Embellishments, or doodles, can also be found in 18th century deed books. Each clerk trained for many years under a master scribe to learn handwriting script. It is typical to find that our 18th century Clerks of Court embellished the first word, usually at the top of each page, either writing in very large script, or decorating the script with extra flourishes, such as curls and dots.



Fairfax County Deed Book O-1 page 215



Fairfax County Deed Book O-1 page 213

While fascinating to look at today, these embellishments and notations also serve as a reminder that the clerks and other historical figures brought some character to their legal documents. While some of these drawings had legal import and meaning in the larger text or case, perhaps others may have been a way for Clerks to relax and add a little flair or personalization during their monotonous task of writing official Clerk's copies of records.

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.

Sign up for *Found in the Archives*, the monthly newsletter of the HRC:
<https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/circuit/historic-records-center>