

*Ferries in Fairfax County*

Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center



Happy Fall, and welcome back to *Found in the Archives*! In this month's addition we will discuss some of the ferries that have operated in Fairfax County, and the court records relating to their maintenance and operations.

Fairfax County has numerous creeks (in Virginia, creeks are described as "runs," which you can see in the naming conventions of many land deeds) and rivers scattered throughout its jurisdiction, and the county is also bordered by the Potomac River. Water has always been vital to the transportation of goods and people, especially in the earlier days of the county before the modern transportation infrastructure of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Ferries were an important part of how people traversed this largely agricultural county, and were heavily used across the Potomac as a means of interstate commerce among Virginia, Maryland and the Nation's Capital.



Ferry Landing on Potomac River near Mount Vernon, Hopkins Atlas page 70

*Two pounds of Tobacco for the same*  
 Ordered that George Mason & George Washington Gent: be sum-  
 moned to appear at the next Court to give Security according  
 to Law for keeping the Ferrys at their respective Landings  
 in this County  
 When the Court sate the 17th of ...

Fairfax Court Order Book 1770 page 70

The landings that ferries operated from were typically owned by the wealthy and powerful families of the time and were operated by skilled ferrymen, including enslaved men. According to Fairfax Court Order Book 1770, George Mason and George Washington, two of the wealthiest and most well-known men in the county, were ordered “to be summoned to appear at the next Court to give Security according to Law for keeping the Ferrys at their respective Landings in this County,” meaning George Mason and George Washington were required to put up a bond that they would operate the ferries with good and faithful character.

Fairfax County	D. H. Job:
To George Mason Gent: for keeping Occoquan Ferry.	2000
To John Jenkins for keeping Goose Creek Ferry.	1200

Fairfax Court Order Book 1756 page 170

The Court was also involved with the operation of ferries by setting the rates that were charged for crossings.

One of our earliest ferry records, dating twenty years prior to the American Revolution, shows George Mason receiving 2,000 pounds of tobacco for keeping his Occoquan Ferry operating, and John Jenkins receiving 1,200 pounds of tobacco for his Goose Creek Ferry in 1756.

But ferries were still critical to Fairfax commerce as the Civil War loomed. In 1863, the court was setting rates in American currency, unlike the previous examples from before the Revolutionary War. Joseph Janney applied to operate a ferry on the Occoquan, and when the court approved his application, it set the rates he could charge for various trips. One man or woman and one horse incurred a fee of 10 cents, one horse team including a driver was 25 cents, and a loaded team of four horses including a driver cost 75 cents per trip. Cattle was either 3 cents or 5 cents per head, depending on the type.

to be employed, one.

The following are the Rates of Ferriage established for said Ferry by the County Court of Fairfax County. - to wit:

For ferrying across one horse & man, or woman	.10
" " " one man, or woman	.05
" " " a one horse team, including driver	.25
" " " a two horse team, " "	.35
" " " a four horse team " " light	.50
" " " " " " " loaded	.75
" " " neat cattle per head	.03
" " " beef cattle per head	.05

Fairfax Court Order Book 1863 page 16

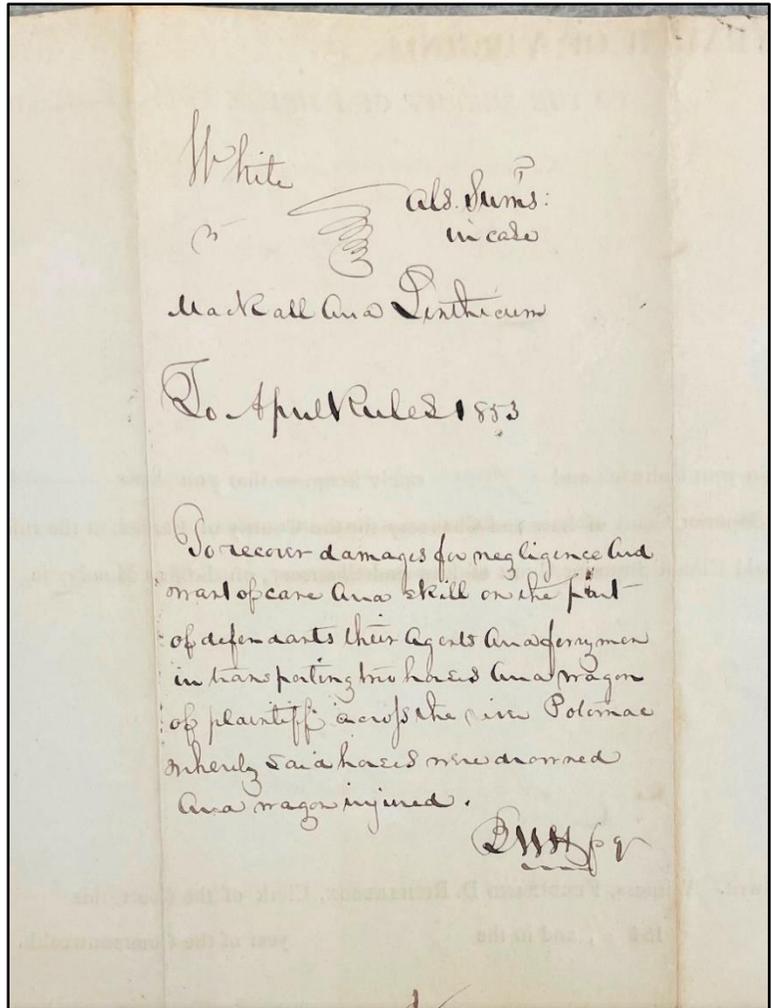
Jackson  
 vs Mackall & Linthicum  
 To apud Bules 1853  
 For loss of plaintiffs property  
 submitted to defendant as common  
 carrier.  
 E. M. Linthicum

✓

The court also has records of ferries because of lawsuits over property lost during ferry accidents. On January 20, 1853, Samuel Jackson and Levi White were both on a ferry from Washington, D.C. over the Potomac to Fairfax, each with two horses and a wagon. Both Jackson and White lost their wagons and horses as the boat partially sank on the river. In 1854 and 1855, both men successfully sued for the cost of their lost horses and wagons with a claim of negligence against the ferry owners and operators.

Excerpt from Fairfax Term Papers 1854-402, Samuel Jackson vs Benjamin Mackall and Otho M. Linthicum

While these records are a small portion of our collection, they help bring us back to a different time before Fairfax County was as large and bustling as it is today. Before interstates, express lanes, and airports, people relied on these ferries for transportation and commerce across the region.



Excerpt from Fairfax Term Papers 1855-266, Levi White vs Benjamin Mackall and Otho M. Linthicum

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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](mailto: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.

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