

# FAIRFAX COUNTY

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## VIRGINIA

### Found in the Archives no. 91 Circuit Court Clerk's Office Historic Records Center

#### Fairfax Registration of Free Negroes

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Happy October, and welcome to Found in the Archives, a publication of The Clerk of the Fairfax Circuit Court, 19th Judicial Circuit, who proudly serves The City of Fairfax & Fairfax County. In this month's edition of Found in the Archives, we will look at the Historic Records Center's *Registration of Free Negroes*, two books from the early Nineteenth Century that the Fairfax Court was bound by law to use to register free people of color living in Fairfax County.

*\*Note: Materials in the Library of Virginia's collections contain historical terms, phrases, and images that are offensive to modern readers. These include demeaning and dehumanizing references to race, ethnicity, and nationality; enslaved or free*

*status; physical and mental ability; religion; sex; and sexual orientation and gender identity. (see: The Library of Virginia)*

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The Historic Records Center has two, bound volumes of Registrations of Free Negroes, but we know a third one is missing because the two in our possession are titled as Volume 2 and Volume 3. In 1793, the Virginia General Assembly passed a law that required free people of color to register with their County Court Clerk. In this registration, they had to provide the means by which they were freed, as well as identifying information including age, eye color, and approximate height. The Clerk would write a physical description of the person into the ledger, noting any distinguishing, visible characteristics like scars or marks.

Because we do not have a Registration for the first 20 years after this law went into effect at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, we infer that Volume 1 of the Fairfax Registry of Freed Negroes is missing. Importantly, however, Vol. 2 begins in the year 1822, which marks the beginning of the antebellum era.

Most often in our Court record groups, Fairfax residents could be freed by a Deed of Manumission or could be freed in the Will of their Enslaver; these were the primary legal instruments which served to free a slave. Because of a 1662 Virginia General Assembly act titled "Negro women's children to serve according to the condition of the mother," freedom status followed maternal lineage, so people of color born to a free mother were also free. If the mother's status was the reason for freedom, individuals would have to provide the means by which their mother was free in their registration.

Register No. 1. book No. 2  
Virginia

William Mose Clerk of the County  
Court of Fairfax in the Commonwealth of Virginia do  
hereby Certify that the bearer hereof, Negro, At about  
45 years of age, five feet ten inches high, slender made,  
a number of scars on the breast was late the property  
of John Mose of the said County who by a deed of  
Manumission dated the 7<sup>th</sup> day of December 1795 and  
duly acknowledged before the said Court and now of  
Record in my office did among other set free and  
exonerate him the said Negro At from further  
service at the expiration of twenty seven years from the  
date of the said deed, and the said term of twenty  
seven years having expired, being the time limited  
for his servitude aforesaid, I have upon application  
of the said Negro At caused him to be registered  
in my office pursuant to law

Given Under my hand this 16<sup>th</sup> day of  
September 1822 —  
Attest,  
Jas. L. Hiselett

At a Court held for Fairfax County the 16<sup>th</sup>  
day of September 1822 —

Fairfax County Registration of Free Negroes, Volume 2 Registration no. 1

One example of some of the interesting history surrounding free people of color in antebellum Fairfax County is Harriet Hall, a free woman who owned land in modern day Fairfax City. Harriet Hall, who also went by Harriet Lamb, can be seen on the 1879

Hopkins Atlas. Although the Hopkins Atlas is from 1879, Harriet purchased her land as a free woman in 1844, twenty years before the Civil War.

Register No. 154. Book No. 2  
 Virginia to wit  
 The bearer hereof Thomas Hall  
 a Muttatto Laid about Eighteen years of age five  
 feet four and a quarter inches high, Stand made  
 pleasant Countenance the thumb on his right  
 hand much shorter than the thumb of the left no  
 other perceivable marks or scars is the Daughter  
 of Catherine Hall, alias Lamb a free woman  
 of Color as appears from an affidavit of James  
 L. Triplett on file in my office Whereupon a  
 Quire under my hand this 18<sup>th</sup> day of October 1831

Fairfax County Registration of Free Negroes, Volume 2 Registration no. 154



Hopkins Atlas, page 79 Providence District



**The Registration of Free Negroes, Volume 2** also has the registration of West Ford, a man who was enslaved by the Washington family and went on to purchase the property that became Gum Springs, the historic, free Black community in Fairfax County.

Register No. 121 Book No. 2  
Virginia to wit:  
The bearer hereof West Ford a yellow  
man about forty seven years of age five feet eight and  
an half inches high pleasant countenance, a wrinkle  
resembling a scar on the left cheek, a scar on the left  
corner of the upper lip, is a free man emancipated by  
the last Will and Testament of Hannah Washington  
as appears from an original Register had & granted  
by the County Court of Fairfax and this day summoned  
the said West Ford has with him his children and  
a boy by the name of Daniel <sup>with a bear in his paws</sup> about fourteen years of  
age the other a girl about eleven years of age, the  
children of Pricilla Ford a free woman man-  
-mitted by Isaac W. Pherson as appears by a cer-  
-tificate of George C. Washington on file in my office  
Whitcomb &c. Given under my hand this 17<sup>th</sup>  
day of October 1831

Fairfax County Registration of Free Negroes, Volume 2 Registration no. 121

While the physical copies of the *Registration of Free Negroes* have always been available for use by researchers at the Historic Records Center, we are pleased to report that both volumes are now available digitally with our colleagues at the Library of Virginia's *Virginia Untold: The African American Narrative* project. Through this initiative with the Library of Virginia, the project "provides digital access to records that document some of the lived experiences of enslaved and free Black and multiracial people in the Library of Virginia's Collections." With this digital access, pages of our bound Registry records are now available for use by researchers everywhere, and they provide valuable information for genealogy research, students, and people researching the free Black community here in Fairfax. Once you've examined our Registrations online, feel free to come see the original, bound books themselves at our office Monday-Friday from 8am-4pm daily, or by appointment. For more information on individuals in the Registrations, we welcome research requests and appointments



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.