

FOUND IN THE ARCHIVES, no. 17 – February 2016

Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center



Happy February! The Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center is excited to continue bringing our monthly newsletter, *Found in the Archives*, to you.

This month is the second of a two-part newsletter. In this edition, we will look at ordinaries and how some were used for court operations.

As noted in our previous edition of *Found in the Archives*, ordinaries and taverns were an important part of everyday life in colonial Virginia, as well as during the late 18th and 19th centuries. Not only did ordinaries serve as social gathering places, they could also be used for county and court functions. Our records indicate that many taverns/ordinaries were used for the purposes of county government.¹

While it may be hard for us to imagine conducting official court business in a modern-day bar, during the 18th and 19th centuries, taverns were not considered to simply be a place to get a drink. They were well-known establishments and landmarks on well-traveled roads. All residents would have been familiar with their local tavern.

A notice filed in a Chancery Case from 1832 shows one of the ways in which taverns appear in court records. Taverns were often used as a setting where parties in a court case could go and take statements from witnesses that would be entered into the case record. The notice filed as part of Chancery Case 1832-002 – George Gunnell vs William Moss – shows three different taverns used as meeting places.

In the document below, William Moss, who was the defendant in the court case, sent notice to George Gunnell, the plaintiff, that he would be taking statements of various people who had information relating to his case. He named three separate taverns as the meeting place for the taking of the witness statements. The first tavern is the Tavern of Enoch Grigsby in the town of Centreville. He also met in the Tavern of Gordon Allison in the Town of Providence. Lastly, he used the Tavern of Samuel Catts in the West End of Alexandria. In all three cases he noted that the “affidavits would be taken between the hours of nine o’clock in the morning and seven in the evening.” The fact that these three taverns covered the entire county from west to east shows how they functioned as places convenient to the public.

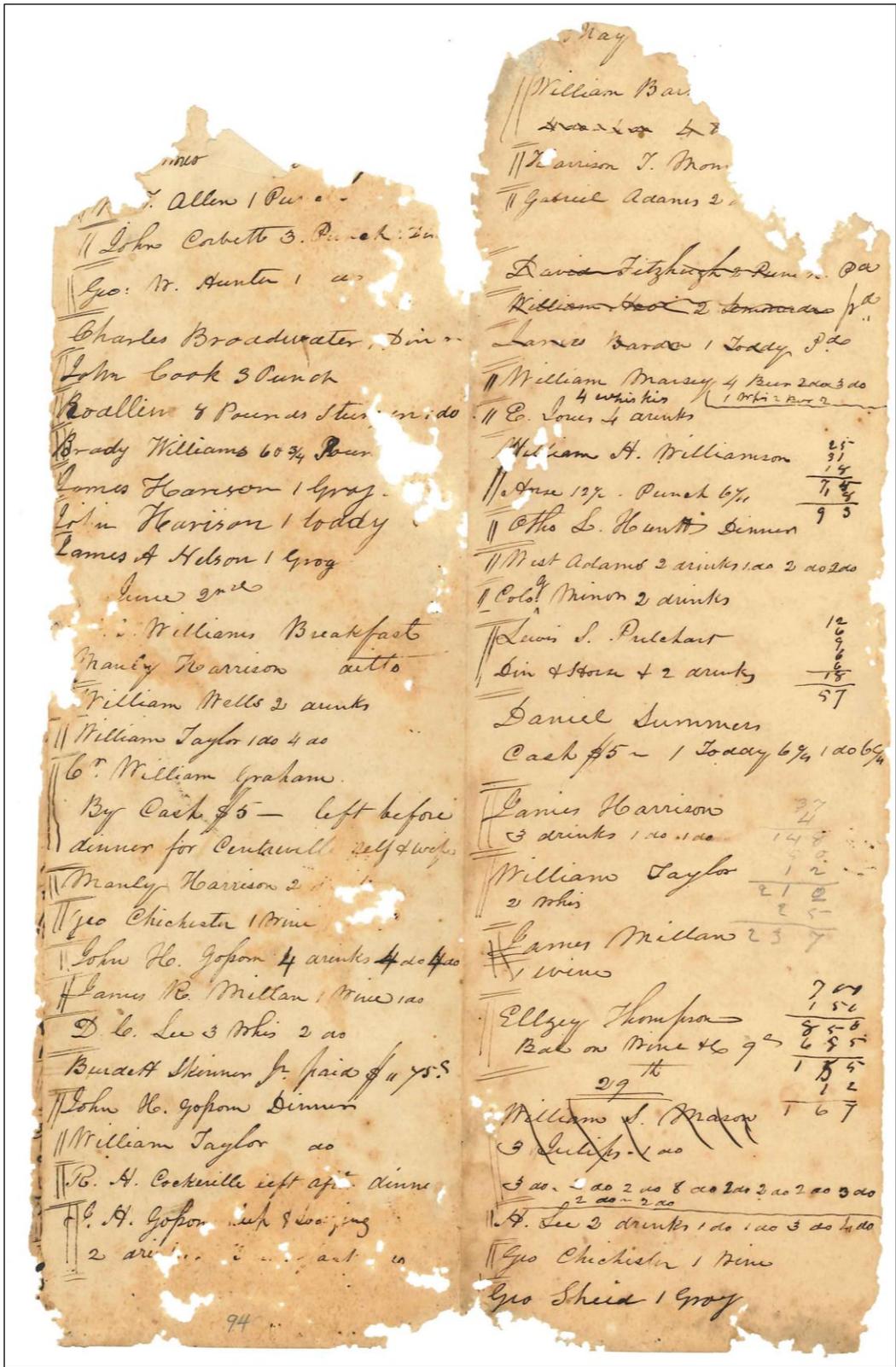
¹ After searching the Code of Virginia, no law could be identified that indicated that taverns or ordinaries could be used for elections or hearings in court cases. However, nothing was found to preclude these establishments from being used in this way, either. Based on the frequency with which these orders appear in our records, the use of ordinaries for government purposes seems to have been common.

To George Gurnell
Sir You will take notice that I shall on
Friday the 8th day of great Month at the Tavern of Enock
Gibbs in the Town of Capetown proceed to take the
affidavit of Benedict M. Lane, and on Saturday the ninth
of the same Month at the Tavern of Isaac Allison in the
Town of Port Jackson proceed to take the affidavits of Ter-
-rain and D. Richardson, Robert Ratcliffe, Joshua
Gurnell and others, and at the Tavern of Sam^l. Catts
at West end on Tuesday the 12th of the same Month proceed
to take the affidavits of Richard Mason and others which
affidavits when taken are intended to be offered in evidence
in the injunction filed by You against me in the County
Court of Tanjaer, the affidavits will be taken between
the hours of nine O'clock in the Morning and Seven in the
Evening, and if not finished on the days specified Con-
-tinued from day to day until all are taken
May 26th 1832
Yours A. G. [Signature]

Mystery document!

The document below was found while reorganizing the Historic Record Center's files. It appears to be a tavern accounting of some sort – we are not sure why it is here in our collection, but we are glad we have it!

It is approximately 200 years old, and unfortunately, the document is in very poor shape, and is quite fragile with insect damage. It has been folded vertically and is very delicate along the seams.



These are two of the pages of the tavern account. If you look closely, you can see the names of the patrons and what they ordered.

Wine, punch, "grog," whiskeys, and juleps seemed to have been popular fare. Some patrons ordered dinner.

This account appears to be a working copy for the tavern owner, judging by his many notations and calculations.

Unfortunately, we do not know which establishment this account belonged to. Based on the patrons (many of whom played a big role in county politics during the 1820s and 1830s), we suspect the account came from the Willcoxon Tavern/Hotel, which sat directly across the street from the Fairfax Courthouse.

The document above is one example of the types of the unique records we have here at the Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center. For more information on documents in this edition of *Found in the Archives*, please email historicalrecords@fairfaxcounty.gov or call 703-246-4168.