



National Archives and Records Administration

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The U.S. Circuit Court for the District of Columbia, 1801–1863

After the seat of government moved to Washington DC, on December 1, 1800, Congress passed an act for the government of the Federal District on February 27, 1801 (2 Stat. 103). One part of this act created a circuit court for the District of Columbia. This court had the same powers vested in other circuit courts and consisted of one chief judge and two assistant judges, all three of whom were required to be residents of the District of Columbia. The act additionally provided the court with broader jurisdiction than that of the other circuit courts, since state and municipal courts did not exist in the new District. In 1838, the circuit court also served as an appellate court for the district court, the Orphans' Court, and the Criminal Court. The court held sessions in both Washington and Alexandria counties until July 1846, when Congress returned Alexandria County to the State of Virginia. The circuit court operated until the Supreme Court for the District of Columbia assumed all of its functions in 1863.

Records

___M1021, *Minutes of the U.S. Circuit Court for the District of Columbia, 1801–1863*. 6 rolls. DP. The minutes are a chronological record of the activities of the U.S. Circuit Court for the District of Columbia, showing dates of sessions; names of presiding judges, marshals, and clerks; and, usually, judgments and orders of the court arising from the litigation of original and appellate, civil, criminal, and admiralty cases before it. The minutes relate to cases involving such issues as slavery and the slave trade, usury, trespass, bankruptcy, naturalization proceedings, and petitions for discharge from apprenticeship. In most cases, the minutes list the case and give a brief account of the action taken. They can also provide names of persons summoned as jurors or subpoenaed as witnesses. The minutes contain additional information relating to individuals in the District, such as notices of death of well-known individuals and licenses or permits issued. This microfilm publication includes only those minutes created in Washington County; the clerk of the court for Arlington County took the minutes for sessions held in Arlington after the 1846 retrocession.

___M434, *Habeas Corpus Case Records of the U.S. Circuit Court for the District of Columbia, 1820–1863*. 2 rolls. A writ of habeas corpus is a court order instructing a person who is detaining another to bring the detainee before the court, usually to explain the reason for the detention. Article I, Section 9, of the U.S. Constitution ensures the privilege of the writ of habeas corpus. Section 14 of an act of September 24, 1789 (1 Stat. 81), gave all U.S. courts the power to issue writs of habeas corpus.

This microfilm publication reproduces the approximately 450 habeas corpus cases heard by the circuit court from 1820 to 1863. The records relate to both civil and criminal proceedings, including crimes, indentures of apprenticeship, family issues, insolvency and bankruptcy, persons alleged to be runaway slaves, and illegal enlistments in the military. Documents include petitions for writs of habeas corpus, writs of habeas corpus, affidavits, summonses, and other papers filed in habeas corpus proceedings. The records are arranged chronologically by year. There is a name-searchable database available in the National Archives Building's Research Center.

___M433, *Records of the U.S. Circuit Court for the District of Columbia Relating to Slaves, 1851–1863*. 3 rolls. This microfilm publication reproduces records relating to slavery kept by the U.S. Circuit Court for the District of Columbia, including emancipation papers, 1862; manumission papers and affidavits of freedom, 1857–63; and fugitive slave case papers, 1851–63. There is a name-searchable database available in the National Archives Building's Research Center.

Emancipation papers, 1862: Section 2 of the act of April 16, 1862, required that owners claiming compensation for their freed slaves file schedules of their slaves by July 15, 1862. A supplementary act of July 12, 1862 (12 Stat. 538), permitted submission of schedules by slaves whose owners had neglected to file. It also granted freedom to slaves whose owners lived outside of the District of Columbia if the slave had been employed with the owner's consent in the District any time after April 16, 1862.

The emancipation records consist of the schedules and supporting documentation submitted as a result of these two acts. The records are organized by act of Congress and thereunder generally by last name of slave owner (act of April 16, 1862) or last name of slave (act of July 12, 1862).

Manumission papers and affidavits of freedom, 1857–63: Manumission papers record the voluntary freeing of slaves by their owners and generally contain schedules similar to the emancipation schedules as well as accompanying documentation, such as will extracts and letters. The affidavits of freedom consist of an affidavit sworn by a free individual testifying to the freedom of a black resident of the District. The manumission papers and affidavits of freedom are organized by date.

Fugitive slave case papers, 1851–63: As part of the Compromise of 1850, the act of September 18, 1850 (9 Stat. 462), provided that claimants to fugitive slaves could recover the slaves either by applying to Federal judges and commissioners for warrants for the arrest of the fugitives or by arresting the slaves and taking them before the judges or commissioners to establish ownership. The fugitive slave case records are organized by date and can contain warrants for arrest and documentation of proof of ownership.

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