

FOUND IN THE ARCHIVES, no. 68 – November 2020
Archival Enemies
Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center



Greetings from the Historic Records Center! The year 2020 seems to leave no aspect of our lives unscathed, and our repository is no exception. Even in the modern era of temperature-controlled records storage rooms, the Archivists of the Fairfax Circuit Court have been dealing with one of archivists' biggest enemies: MOLD. In this edition of *Found in the Archives*, we will discuss some of the environmental and operational realities that we trained for in school – and that we have planned for as professional Records Custodians – to ensure our past *and* our present, sharing the timeless fight for records preservation.

In the modern Historic Records Center, records are kept in climate-controlled rooms and away from light as much as possible. But even with careful storage and thorough regular inspection, Archivists can discover environmental impacts to historic records. We manage these threats to records through several techniques.

Visitors will see signs advising patrons to use only pencil around records and to refrain from eating or drinking in records rooms. These archival best-practices allow us to control environmental and physical threat to the records, ensuring they will be available for another two hundred years and beyond. Unfortunately, the records have not always been so well-protected, as evidenced by the damage still seen in some of our documents cared for today.

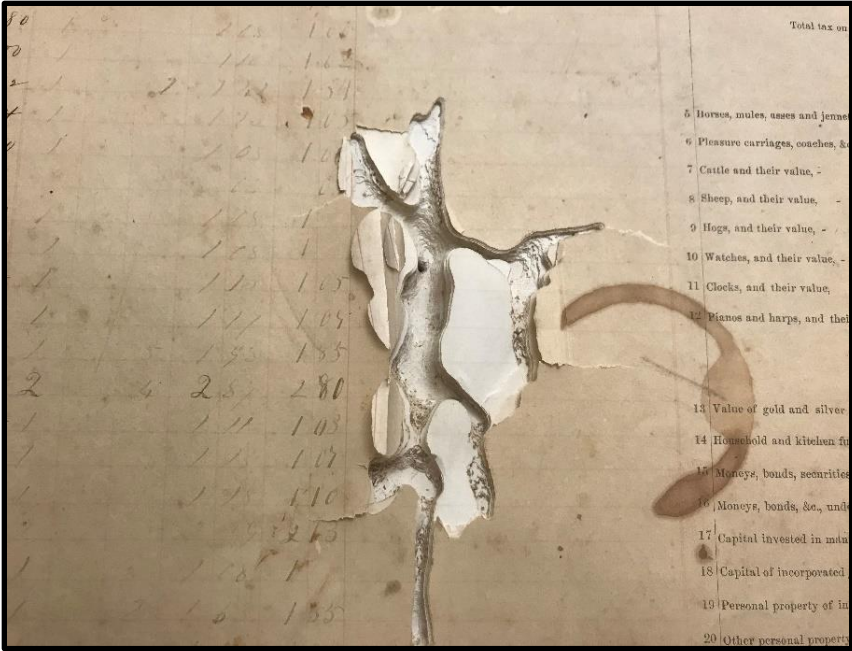


The image to the left is from the 1970s, when many court records were brought down from 1954 Courthouse attic. Prior to being in the attic, some of these books and papers were also left in the Clerk's Office for the duration of the Civil War.

Documents and books kept in those environments were exposed to humidity, water, animals, and other elements damaging to archival materials. Even after conservation, some information in the court records is irretrievable due to permanent environmental damage.

Image Courtesy of Fairfax City Museum

Food and drinks have not always been banned from the Clerk's Office records rooms, as evidenced by coffee/tea rings found in many of the books. The tax book to the right had the misfortune of being marked not only by coffee but also a hungry insect who ate through to the very last page.



Fairfax County Property Tax Book, 1871



Fairfax Circuit Court Rule Book, 1858

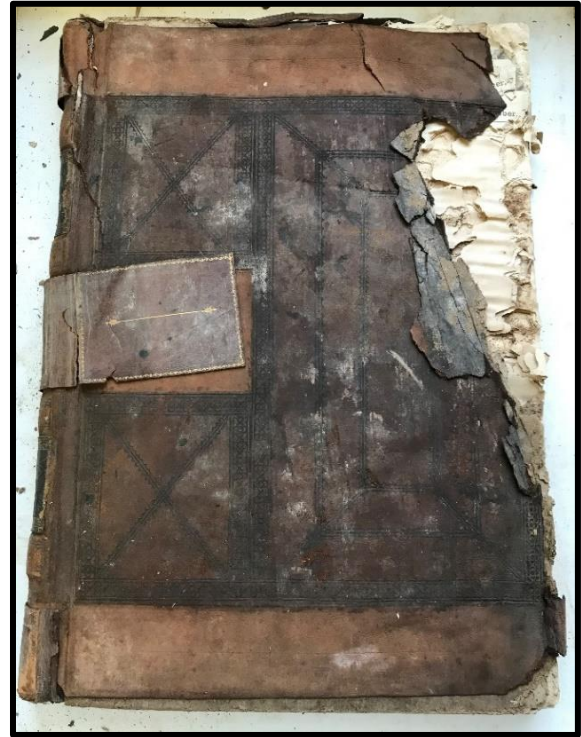
Tobacco and coffee stains, ink spills, and moisture remnants are found quite frequently in the Court's land records which were used heavily by title researchers in the mid-1900s. Certain stains can sometimes be removed by conservation treatment, but the information eaten by insects is lost forever. Other than the above tax book and the Rule Book on the left, thankfully, page loss due to insect damage has been minimal. However, efforts are still made to ensure the critters stay far away.

Insects were not the only archival enemy that plagued the 1858 Rule Book. We do not have a complete understanding of which books and documents came from the 1954 attic storage, but judging by the amount of water damage to the pages

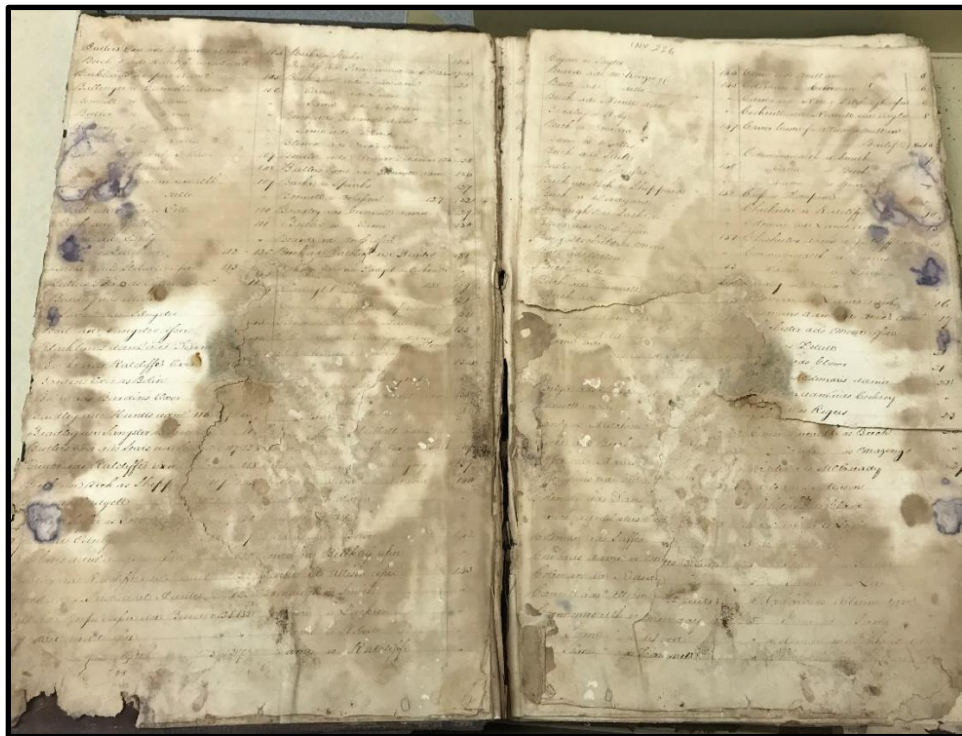
and bird droppings on the leather cover, it is likely that the 1858 Rule Book was kept in the attic. Bird droppings are another common sighting on the covers of some of our older books, and although droppings do not typically penetrate to the pages, they are

evidence of the environment in which these records were stored for many years.

Books exposed to moisture and extreme temperatures show various effects. In some instances, ink bled or mold grew. Other times, pages stuck together and leather covers were warped. HRC staff often finds pages covered in dirt and grass where the book was clearly left open to that page for lengths of time (see execution book image below)—some clearly on the floor, having been trampled.



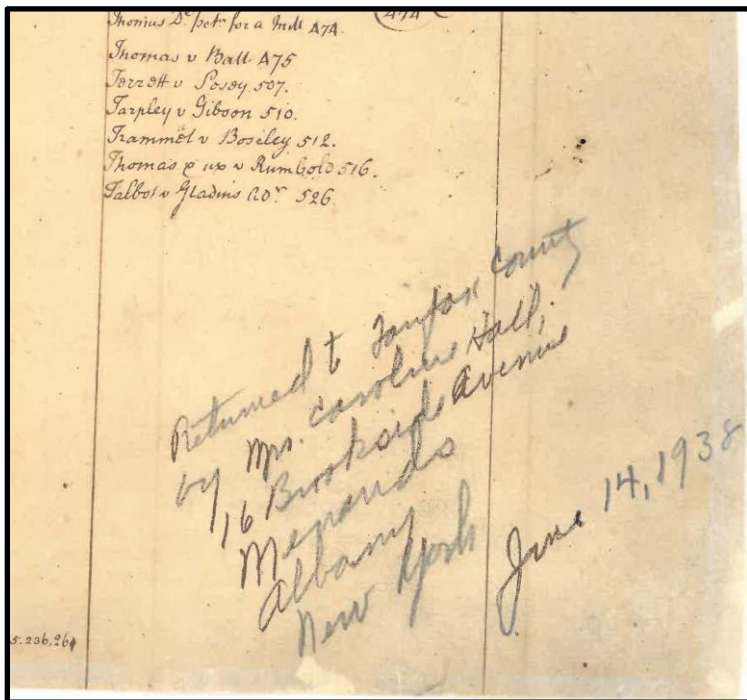
Fairfax Circuit Court Rule Book, 1858



Fairfax County Sheriff's Execution Book, 1837

The Clerk's Five-Year Preservation Plan, which is revised and issued annually, identifies records for conservation by the urgency of treatment needed and subject matter priority; this is a key tool in supporting the work of a 21st century Court archive. While we cannot control the centuries of harsh environments some of these records faced, the Clerk tends to them, so that the public can access these records, even today.

There is yet another enemy to every public records custodian – theft. Some of the records left in the Fairfax County Clerk's Office at the onset of the Civil War have never been seen again – likely taken by Union or Confederate soldiers, or well-intentioned Fairfax residents who spirited key records away, when the courthouse grounds were occupied by military forces over several years.



Fairfax County Court Order Book, 1749- 1754

The writing on the index page for Fairfax Court Order Book 1749 – 1754 reads, “Returned to Fairfax County by Mrs. Caroline Hall, 16 Brookside Avenue, Menands, Albany, New York, June 14, 1938.”

The Historic Records Center has received more than a few returned books and documents from families of Civil War soldiers who brought home souvenirs of their time in Fairfax.

The HRC is still missing fifteen original Deed Books and several Minute Books from the Revolutionary Era—not to mention most all Loose Judgment and Term Papers from that time. Each returned item has an exciting story to tell, and while Historic Records Center staff realize not all will make their way home to the Fairfax Courthouse, we actively seek – and secure – the return of original Court Records.

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If you have questions about these or other records found at the Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center, please email CCRHistoricRecords@fairfaxcounty.gov or call 703-246-4168.

*Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records remains **by appointment only**. To schedule an appointment, please call 703-246-4168. We can also assist with research requests over the phone or via email!*