



# **Guide to the Robert Carter letter books and day books, 1771-1804 and undated**

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## Summary

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**Collection Title:**

Robert Carter letter books and day books, 1771-1804 and undated

**Creator:**

Carter, Robert, 1728-1804

**Abstract:**

Robert Carter III (1728-1804) was a plantation owner, enslaver, and iron manufacturer at Nomini Hall plantation in Westmoreland County, Virginia. The collection contains correspondence, letter books, day books, and other papers that document colonial Virginia including: the Revolutionary War; plantation and family life; 18th century slavery and emancipation; the iron and textile industries; Methodist, Presbyterian, Quaker, Swedenborgian, and Baptist religious beliefs and practices, and their relevance to slavery and race; tobacco cultivation in Virginia; and life in Baltimore, Maryland after the Revolutionary War. Documents related to Carter's unusual act in 1791 to gradually manumit hundreds of enslaved persons are also in this collection. The letter books house over 3,000 pieces of correspondence written by Carter to well-known individuals of the time, such as Charles Carroll, Benjamin Day, William Ebzer, Thomas Fairfax, William Grayson, Patrick Henry, Ludwell Lee, Richard Lee, Peyton Randolph, George Turberville, John Turberville, and George Wythe, and letters to Carter written by Alexander Campbell, Christopher Collins, Thomas Jones, Richard Lee, George Newman, John Overall, and Simon Triplett. In his letters, Carter refers many times to the education and welfare of his many children and writes to them while they are away from home. Transcripts are available for the majority of the materials.

**Extent:**

9.5 Linear Feet

**Language:**

Material in English

**Collection ID:**

RL.00196

**Permalink:**

<https://idn.duke.edu/ark:/87924/m1430j>

**Preferred Citation**

[Identification of item], Robert Carter Letter Books and Day Books, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

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## Background

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### Scope and Content

The letter books, day books, wills, loose letters, and other documents in the Robert Carter papers offer rich information on social and economic conditions in Virginia and Maryland in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, and disclose a great many details on plantation life and the management of enslaved persons, overseers, secretaries, ship's captains, and skilled workers employed in Carter's various enterprises. The records document milling, spinning, weaving, iron works, and linen manufacture at the time of the Revolutionary War, and the frequent shipments of goods to and from Europe. Carter comments in great detail on the development of new plantations and the purchase, clothing and feeding, training, and punishment of enslaved persons. The records also document his efforts to free a large number of enslaved persons, which eventually resulted in many hundreds acquiring their freedom after prolonged legal battles following his death in 1804.

Three sets of transcripts represent almost the entire body of correspondence and other records in the collection and facilitates access to the content of the volumes, many of which are fragile. Other loose papers include letters, invoices, notes, financial accounts, and a few clippings.

Information of the Revolutionary War's impact on Virginia and its plantations is found in both the letter books and day books, including militia affairs in Westmoreland County and Captain Lane's Company of that county. Carter also describes British ships off the Virginia coast, and raids on his plantations by the British, who carried off many enslaved persons. Carter also includes descriptions of his oath of allegiance (Daybook XIV) and his membership in the Virginia House of Burgesses. After the Revolutionary War, his comments focus increasingly on life in Baltimore, where he had set up his household.

Carter's day books and letter books also contain frequent commentary on religious beliefs, preachings, and meeting houses. He examines Swedenborgian, Presbyterian, Quaker, and Methodist practices and beliefs, but around the Revolutionary War turns to the Baptist Church and leaders such as Lewis Lunsford, who baptised him, and Ebenezer Brookes. Carter copied a circular from preacher John Leland (1750-1841) into Daybook XVI. The conclusion of the sermon deals with the sin of slavery and the freedom of enslaved people, the burden of slavery to enslavers, and the duties of enslaved persons to their enslavers.

Perhaps influenced by Leland's stand, Carter executed a deed in 1791 setting up a gradual manumission of hundreds of enslaved persons on his plantations. Volume XI in the collection contains this act of manumission, recorded in the first few pages, then followed by many pages of lists of the names of the enslaved individuals who were to be freed, their names (a few with both first and last names), ages, and gender, their work roles (e.g. cooper, postilion), and the plantations where they labored. Also in the loose papers is a document recording a question posed by Robert Carter relative to the application of the law in Virginia as to the responsibility of a former enslaver continuing to maintain those he has set free who may have physical or mental disabilities.

The individuals to whom Carter sent letters include many well-known individuals of the time: Charles Carroll, Benjamin Day, William Ebzer, Thomas Fairfax, William Grayson, Patrick Henry, Ludwell Lee, Richard Lee, Peyton Randolph, George Turberville, John Tuberville, and George Wythe. Among those writing to Carter were Alexander Campbell, Christopher Collins, Thomas Jones, Richard Lee, George Newman, John Overall, and Simon Triplett. There are also many references in the letter books and day books to Carter's many children, especially concerning their education.

## **Biographical/Historical**

Robert Carter III (1737-1804) was the son of Robert Carter II (1705-1733) and Priscilla (Churchill) Carter of Nomony Hall (alternately spelled Nominy and Nomini in other sources), Westmoreland County, Virginia, and the grandson of Colonel Robert Carter, called "King" Carter. Although he lived in Westmoreland County and England until he moved to Williamsburg in 1761, he returned to "Nomini Hall" and Westmoreland in 1773, when his letter books and day books begin.

At the age of 21 he inherited tens of thousands of acres that he developed into the eighteen plantations he owned across the state of Virginia. It is estimated that by 1791 he owned over 3400 enslaved persons. Carter is most known historically for his efforts to emancipate over 500 individuals, the largest manumission known prior to the Civil War. The document setting out this plan is in the collection, and it is chiefly made up of long lists of the names of all the enslaved individuals who were to be freed.

Carter was a member of the vestry of Cople Parish, the Church of England, whose affairs are referred to in the early day books (Daybook XIII) but soon joined the Baptist Church and caused a scandal by becoming a member of a racially mixed congregation. By 1793, with his oldest son, Robert Bladen Carter, dead in a brawl in London, his older daughters married, and his oldest surviving son, John Tasker Carter, installed at Nomony Hall, he purchased a house in Baltimore and brought his youngest daughters to live there. He had placed his youngest son, George Carter, in school at the University of Pennsylvania.

In these later years, Carter was involved in legal tangles over his properties; details are noted in the letterbooks. Carter died in 1804.

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## Arrangement

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The volumes in the collection were originally numbered as follows: letter books, I-X; deed of emancipation, Vol. XI; day books, XI-XVIII. The three sets of transcripts are incomplete: there are gaps in volume numbers in each one. The "A" transcripts are excerpts from the letter books and day books. The "B" set consists of complete transcriptions of almost all the volumes but is less complete than set "C."

The "C" set seems to contain the most accurate and complete transcripts of all original manuscripts, including full dates marking the entries, and transcriptions of all markings and information found on covers, endpapers, and book plates. There are some gaps of content in the transcripts. Volume 12 - religious commentary and notes - is only found in the "C" transcript set.

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## Administrative Information

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### Publication Statement

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411 Chapel Drive

Duke University

Durham 27708

[askRL@duke.edu](mailto:askRL@duke.edu)

URL: <https://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/>

### Access Restrictions

Collection is open for research.

Because of their fragility, original volumes are generally closed to use; copies in the form of transcripts are available in the collection. Please consult with a reference archivist for permission to access originals.

## **Use Restrictions**

The copyright interests in this collection have not been transferred to Duke University. For more information, consult the copyright section of the Regulations and Procedures of the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library.

## **Processing Information**

Processed by Rubenstein Library staff

Encoded by Paula Jeannet and Sara Reams, April 2014

Accession(s) described in this collection guide: 1933, 60-209, 68-302, and 89-117.

## **Acquisition Information**

The Robert Carter letter books and day books were acquired by the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library from 1933 to 1989.

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## **Related Materials**

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### **Separated Material**

A pamphlet by the Trustees of the Missionary Society of Connecticut, [Summary of Christian Doctrine and Practice: Designed Especially for the Use of the People In the New Settlements or the United States of America](#) (Hartford, Hudson and Goodwin, 1804) was transferred and cataloged separately for the rare book collections in 1965.

### **Related Material**

Robert Wormeley Carter papers, 1813-1850 (16 items) [son of Landon Carter and grandson of "King" Carter of Westmoreland County, Virginia]Rubenstein Library, Duke University

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## Names and Subjects

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- Virginia -- Commerce
- Baltimore (Md.) -- History
- Tobacco -- Virginia
- Enslaved persons -- Emancipation
- Westmoreland County (Va.) -- History
- Virginia -- Religious life and customs
- Virginia -- History -- 1775-1865
- Family life -- Virginia -- 18th century
- Daybooks
- Letter books
- Slavery -- Virginia
- Plantation life -- Virginia
- Iron industry and trade -- Virginia
- Freed persons -- Virginia -- History -- 18th century
- Ebzer, William
- Fairfax, Thomas Fairfax, Lord, 1692-1782
- Collins, Christopher
- Day, Benjamin
- Jones, Thomas
- Lee, Ludwell
- Grayson, William, 1736-1790
- Henry, Patrick, 1736-1799
- Carter, Robert, 1728-1804
- Campbell, Alexander
- Carroll, Charles, 1723-1783
- Randolph, Peyton, 1721-1775
- Overall, John
- Newman, George
- Lee, Richard Henry, 1732-1794
- Wythe, George, 1726-1806
- Turberville, John
- Turberville, George
- Triplett, Simon

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## Collection Inventory

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### **Original Manuscript Volumes and Loose Papers, 1771-1804 and undated**

**Physical Description:** 4 boxes

**Use Restrictions:**

Because of their fragility, original volumes are generally closed to use; copies in the form of transcripts are available in the collection. Please consult with a reference archivist for permission to access originals.

Information folder Box 1

**Scope and Contents note**

Additional information folders are available in the repository collection control files.

Letterbook: Vol. 1, 1772 January 28-1774 May 10 Box 1

Letterbook: Vol. 2, 1774 May 20-1775 May 7 Box 1

Letterbook: Vol. 3 1775 June 29-1780 May 16 Box 1

**Physical Description:** 4 folders

Letterbook: Vol. 4, 1780 May 31-1782 April 16 Box 2

Letterbook: Vol. 5, 1782 April 17-1784 June 12 Box 2

Letterbook: Vol. 6, 1784 June 30-1785 November 16 Box 2

Letterbook: Vol. 7, 1785 November 15-1787 September 12 Box 2

Letterbook: Vol. 8, 1787 August 20-1789 July 18 Box 3

Letterbook: Vol. 9, 1789 July 21-1792 June Box 3

Letterbook: Vol. 10, 1792 July-1793 April Box 3

Deed of Emancipation: Vol. 11, 1791 August 1 Box 3

**Scope and Contents**

Pages are bound out of order.

Religious Notes: Vol. 12, 1777 July 12-1779 July 4 Box 4

Daybook: Vol. 13, 1773 January 1-1776 November 9 Box 4

Daybook: Vol. 14, 1776 October-1778 March Box 4

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Daybook: Vol. 15, 1778 March 28-1778  
November 8 (online item available) Box 4

**Digital Object:** [Daybook: Vol. 15, 1778 March 28-1778 November 8](#)

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Daybook: Vol. 16, 1784 May 28-1789 July Box 4

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Daybook: Vol. 17, 1785 October 10-1787 April Box 4

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Daybook: Vol. 18, 1793 May 29-1793 December Box 4

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Loose manuscript papers, 1771-1804 and  
undated Box 11

**Scope and Contents note**

Includes letters, invoices, notes, reports, opinions, and queries.

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### Excerpts from Original Volumes ("A" Transcripts), 1772-1793

**Physical Description:** 1 box

**Scope and Contents note**

The "A" set comprises what was judged to be significant excerpts from the collection. Date ranges represent the dates of the excerpts. Volumes 11, 12 and 17 are not present. Complete transcripts for almost all the original manuscripts are found in the "B" and "C" transcript sets.

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"A" Transcripts: Vol. 1, 1772 June 9-1774  
January 27 Box 5

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"A" Transcripts: Vol. 2, 1774 June-1775  
February 17 Box 5

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"A" Transcripts: Vol. 3, 1775 July 18-1780 April  
16 Box 5

**Physical Description:** 3 folders

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"A" Transcripts: Vol. 4, 1780 October 14-1782  
April 16 Box 5

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"A" Transcripts: Vol. 5, 1782 May 16-1784 April  
12 Box 5

|                                                                |       |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| "A" Transcripts: Vol. 6, 1784 September 9-1784<br>November 8   | Box 5 |
| "A" Transcripts: Vol. 7, 1785 November 29-1787<br>September 12 | Box 5 |
| "A" Transcripts: Vol. 8, 1787 September<br>24-1789 June 18     | Box 5 |
| "A" Transcripts: Vol. 9, 1789 July 29-1792 June<br>29          | Box 5 |
| "A" Transcripts: Vol. 10, 1792 July 21-1793<br>February 19     | Box 5 |
| "A" Transcripts: Vol. 13, 1774 August 3-1776<br>July 23        | Box 5 |
| "A" Transcripts: Vol. 14, 1776 November<br>16-1778 February 18 | Box 5 |
| "A" Transcripts: Vol. 15, 1778 June 2-1778<br>November 9       | Box 5 |
| "A" Transcripts: Vol. 16, 1784 June 15-1784<br>November 15     | Box 5 |
| "A" Transcripts: Vol. 18, 1793 May 6-1793<br>December 17       | Box 5 |

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### **Transcripts from Original Volumes and Loose Papers, 1771-1804**

**Physical Description:** 12 boxes

#### **Scope and Contents note**

The "B" and "C" sets comprise full transcripts from all the volumes, with some gaps. The "C" set appears to contain more accurate and complete transcripts, including full dates marking the entries and transcriptions of all markings and information found on covers, endpapers, and book plates. Transcriptions from Volume 12 - religious notes and commentary - are only found in this set.

|                            |       |
|----------------------------|-------|
| "B" Transcripts: Vols. 1-4 | Box 6 |
|----------------------------|-------|

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|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|
| "B" Transcripts: Vols. 5-7<br><b>Physical Description:</b> 2 folders                                                                                                                                                                              | Box 7  |
| "B" Transcripts: Vols. 7-10                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Box 8  |
| "B" Transcripts: Vol. 11 (copy of Carter's Deed of Emancipation), 1791 Aug. 1                                                                                                                                                                     | Box 9  |
| "B" Transcripts: Vols. 13-18                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Box 9  |
| "B" Transcripts (carbon copies): Vols. 1-3<br><b>Physical Description:</b> 3 folders                                                                                                                                                              | Box 9  |
| "B" Transcripts (carbon copies): Vols. 3-5, 7-10<br><b>Physical Description:</b> 10 folders<br><b>Scope and Contents note</b><br>Vols. 5 and 9 of the carbon copies consist of only a few pages. Volume 6 is not present among the carbon copies. | Box 10 |
| "B" Transcripts (carbon copies): Vols. 13-16, 18<br><b>Physical Description:</b> 5 folders                                                                                                                                                        | Box 11 |
| "C" Transcripts: Letterbook, Vol. 1, 1772 Jan. 28-1774 May 10<br><b>Physical Description:</b> 2 folders                                                                                                                                           | Box 12 |
| "C" Transcripts: Letterbook, Vol. 2, 1774 May 20-1775 May 7                                                                                                                                                                                       | Box 12 |
| "C" Transcripts: Letterbook, Vol. 3, 1775 June 29-1780 May 16<br><b>Physical Description:</b> 4 folders                                                                                                                                           |        |
| "C" Transcripts: Letterbook, Vol. 3, part 1, 1775 June 29-December 16                                                                                                                                                                             | Box 12 |
| "C" Transcripts: Letterbook, Vol. 3, part 2a, 1776 January 9-1777 March 24                                                                                                                                                                        | Box 12 |
| "C" Transcripts: Letterbook, Vol. 3, part 2b, 1777 March 24-November 25                                                                                                                                                                           | Box 12 |
| "C" Transcripts: Letterbook, Vol. 3, part 3a, 1777 December 10-1779 February 18                                                                                                                                                                   | Box 12 |

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|--------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|
| "C" Transcripts: Letterbook, Vol. 3 (part 3, cont.)                | Box 13 |
| "C" Transcripts: Letterbook, Vol. 4, 1780 May 31-xxx               | Box 13 |
| <b>Physical Description:</b> 3 folders                             |        |
| "C" Transcripts: Letterbook, Vol. 5, 1782 April 17-1784 June 12    | Box 13 |
| <b>Physical Description:</b> 2 folders                             |        |
| "C" Transcripts: Letterbook, Vol. 6, 1784 June 30-1785 July 12 16  | Box 13 |
| <b>Physical Description:</b> 2 folders                             |        |
| "C" Transcripts: Letterbook, Vol. 6, 1785 July 12-1785 Nov. 16     | Box 14 |
| "C" Transcripts: Letterbook, Vol. 7, 1785 Nov. 15-1787 Sept. 12    | Box 14 |
| <b>Physical Description:</b> 4 folders                             |        |
| "C" Transcripts: Letterbook, Vol. 8, 1787 Aug. 20-1788 June 18     | Box 14 |
| <b>Physical Description:</b> 2 folders                             |        |
| "C" Transcripts: Letterbook, Vol. 8, 1788 June 18-1789 July 18     | Box 15 |
| <b>Physical Description:</b> 2 folders                             |        |
| <b>Scope and Contents note</b>                                     |        |
| With one letter at end dating 1788 July 4.                         |        |
| "C" Transcripts: Letterbook, Vol. 9, 1789 July 21-1792 July 3      | Box 15 |
| <b>Physical Description:</b> 4 folders                             |        |
| "C" Transcripts: Letterbook, Vol. 10, 1792 July 12 -1793 April 26  | Box 15 |
| "C" Transcripts: Vol. 11, Deed of Emancipation, 1791 August 1      | Box 15 |
| "C" Transcripts: Vol. 12, Religious Notes, 1777 July 12 (22 pages) | Box 16 |

|                                                                         |        |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|
| "C" Transcripts: Daybook, Vol. 13, 1773 January<br>1-1776 November 9    | Box 16 |
| <b>Physical Description:</b> 2 folders                                  |        |
| "C" Transcripts: Daybook, Vol. 14, 1776<br>November 16-1778 February 18 | Box 16 |
| "C" Transcripts: Daybook, Vol. 15, 1778 March<br>28-1778 November 8     | Box 16 |
| "C" Transcripts: Daybook, Vol. 16, 1784 May<br>28-1789 July             | Box 16 |
| "C" Transcripts: Daybook, Vol. 17, 1785 October<br>10-1787 April        | Box 16 |
| "C" Transcripts: Daybook, Vol. 18, 1793 May<br>29-1793 December         | Box 16 |
| <b>Physical Description:</b> 2 folders                                  |        |
| Transcripts of loose papers, 1771-1804 and<br>undated                   | Box 16 |
| <b>Physical Description:</b> 20 items                                   |        |

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