

A Guide to the Elizabeth City County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1867-1940

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1867-1940

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History

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Title Statement

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Profile Description

Creation: Machine-readable finding aid derived from being created directly into EAD, created by Greg Crawford, 10 July 2017

Language Usage: Description is in English

Descriptive Summary

Language

English

Collector

Hampton (Va.) Circuit Court

Physical Characteristics

6.30 cubic feet (14 boxes)

Location

Library of Virginia

Repository

The Library of Virginia

Administrative Information

Access Restrictions

There are no restrictions.

Use Restrictions

There are no restrictions.

Acquisition Information

These items came to the Library of Virginia in a transfer of court records from Hampton (Va.) in an undated accession.

Processing Information

Hampton County Coroners' Inquisitions were processed and indexed as two separate units. The bulk of the records were processed in 2017 for the purpose of inclusion in Virginia Untold. Therefore, at the time of processing, pre-1865 records related to enslaved and free Black and Multiracial individuals were isolated and indexed or the purposes of digitizing them for the digital project Virginia Untold: The African American Narrative. In 2025, the remaining pre-1865 and post-1865 inquests were indexed by M. Mason.

Encoded by G. Crawford, 2017; updated by M. Mason, December 2025.

Preferred Citation

Elizabeth City County(Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1867-1940. Local government records collection, Hampton (Va.) Court Records. The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Va.

Adjunct Descriptive Data

Related Material

See the [Lost Records Localities Digital Collection](#) available at Virginia Memory.

Historical Information

Context for Record Type: A carry over from the British system, the separate office of coroner appeared in Virginia about 1660. The judicial duty of the office was to hold inquisitions in cases when persons met a sudden, violent, unnatural or suspicious death, or death without medical attendance. The law did not encourage the Coroner to be a medical professional until the 20th century, and only stipulated that the local court be responsible for the appointment. Although not reliant on profession, this system of affluent white men making the decisions largely ensured that only other white men served in this position for much of its history.

Prior to the Civil War, the coroner would summon a jury of twelve white men, usually prominent citizens of that locality, to assist him in determining cause of death. The jury viewed the body of the deceased and heard the testimony of witnesses which did include both white and Black perspectives. This witness testimony was recorded and after seeing and hearing the evidence, and unlike other judicial proceedings, enslaved people could provide depositions in coroner's inquisitions, but still, an all-white jury delivered in writing to the coroner their conclusion concerning cause of death referred to as the inquisition. These causes of death would be determined by a white perspective and Black individuals were only consulted; they were never in a position to make decisions. After the Civil War, the process remained the same but the racial distinctions stipulating jury eligibility no longer remained. However, as appointments still continued and juror eligibility reserved for those "entitled to vote and hold office," the authority and influence in the hands of white citizens remained throughout the late 19th and early 20th century.

In 1877, an act of the General Assembly changed the number of jurors to six, and by 1926, only the coroner determined cause of death but they could require physicians to assist them with determining cause of death. Then in 1946, the General Assembly abolished the Coroner's office/ office of Coroner's Physician altogether, appointed instead a Chief Medical Examiner, and by 1950 transitioned to a statewide Office of the Chief Medical Examiner which now lives within the Department of Health.

If a criminal act was determined to be the cause of death, the coroner delivered the guilty person to the sheriff and the inquests would be used as evidence in the criminal trial. In this case, coroner's inquisitions were filed with the trial papers. If there was not a trial, coroner's inquisitions were filed separately and are more likely to appear in this collection as a standalone set of documents.

Locality History: Elizabeth City County was named for Elizabeth, daughter of King James I, and was one of the original shires, or counties, first enumerated in 1634. It became extinct on 1 July 1952 when it was incorporated into the city of Hampton, which was the county seat.

Lost Locality Note: Recognized in 1634 as an original shire. Records were burned and/or destroyed during the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. Additional records were burned on April 3, 1865, in Richmond, where they had been moved for safekeeping during the Civil War. A few pre-Civil War volumes such as deed books, will books, and order books exist.

Scope and Content

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.

Coroners' Inquisitions contain graphic and in some cases violent or otherwise disturbing descriptions of death.

Elizabeth City County (Va) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1867-1940, contains investigations into the deaths of individuals who died by a sudden, violent, unnatural or suspicious manner, or died without medical attendance. Causes of death found in these records include accidental, alcohol, drowning, homicide, injuries, infanticide, medical conditions, natural causes ("visitation by God"), and suicide.

Documents commonly found in coroners' inquisitions include the inquisition, depositions, and summons. Some inquisitions contain other documents such as exhibits. Information found in the inquisition include the name of the coroner, the names of the jurors, the name and age of the deceased if known, gender and race of the deceased, and when, how, and by what means the deceased came to his or her death. If the coroner knew the deceased person to be Black or Multiracial, the inquest should identify the person individual's legal status (free or enslaved). If the coroner knew the deceased person to be enslaved, the inquest often includes their name, their enslaver and the enslaver's residence. Information found in the depositions include the name of the deponent(s) and their account of the circumstances that led to the death of the deceased.

Unlike, other localities, much of the coroners' records for Elizabeth City County do not necessarily include a full inquest, but note information concerning the death of an include and then it is noted if a full inquisition was warranted. If a death could be attributed to a medical condition, as many were, the individual did not receive a formal inquisition. Therefore, many of the records for this locality do not include depositions.

While the majority of the inquests document white, Black, and Multiracial individuals, these records also include individuals of Italian, Greek, Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino descent. The documentation of a variety of ethnicities is somewhat unique amongst other coroners' records from Virginia localities, in part because in Elizabeth City County, death certificates were included with the inquest. Death certificates have fields that explicitly document race or ethnicity whereas most inquest records do not record this information.

This proximity to water and shipping accounts for the large number of drownings and deaths related to shipping accidents. There are additionally many deaths connected to the electric rail line, automobiles, and the railways. Another trend in death relates to the large number of deaths by "canned gas" poisoning [ie. Sterno] as many individuals consumed the alcohol-based fuel in the cans during Prohibition.

Inquests of note include:

1906 May 9, Elsa Pavlinic: Julian Pavlinic killed Elsa Pavlinic, his wife, claiming she told him to, as Elsa preferred death to returning to Eastern State Hospital. The couple immigrated from Germany. The inquest includes a pamphlet in German on prostitution which is referenced in depositions.

1912 March 30, Ida Belote: Virginia Christian, a young Black housekeeper, allegedly killed Ida Belote after a dispute between the two. The court convicted Christian of murder and sentenced her to death, making her the first female of the 20th Century to be executed in the Commonwealth. [See also: [Virginia Christian: The Last Woman Executed by Virginia](#)]

1913 October, Georgianna Copeland: A Chesapeake and Ohio passenger train struck Georgianna, Fenton, her son, and Charles, and her husband in their wagon, killing Georgianna and Fenton. There is much dialogue regarding the safety issues surrounding railroad crossings in urban areas, and explores in great detail the various measures being used and experimented with to notify automobiles, electric cars and pedestrians of coming trains.

1921 December 8, T. Azuma: Azuma, identified as Japanese in the record, died from drowning after a fight aboard a ship in Hampton Roads. Azuma and Hideichi Hiromora, a companion [see: 1922 September 25 inquest], were accused of killing George Andrews in search of money and whiskey. Inquest includes papers found in Azuma's pocketbook with both English and Japanese writing.

Arrangement

This collection is arranged

- Series I: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1867-1940, Chronological by date coroner filed inquisition in the court.

Contents List

Series I: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1867-1940

Extent

14 boxes

Physical Location Library of Virginia

Barcode number 0007692278: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1867-1905

Barcode number 0007692279: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1906-1908

Barcode number 0007692280: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1908-1911

Barcode number 0007431368: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1911-1914

Barcode number 0007431369: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1915-1918

Barcode number 0007431370: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1919-1921

Barcode number 0007431371: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1921-1925

Barcode number 0007431373: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1928-1929

Barcode number 0007431374: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1930-1931

Barcode number 0007431375: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1931-1933

Barcode number 0007431376: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1934-1935

Barcode number 0007692281: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1935-1938

Barcode number 0007692282: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1938-1940