

A Guide to the Portsmouth (Va.) Death Records, 1881-1970

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A Collection in the Library of Virginia 1143024-1143083, 1143085, 1143087, 1143088, 1143090-1143101, 1143103, 1143104, 1143106, 1143107, 1143109, 1143110, 1143112, 1143113, 1143115-1143119, 1143121-1143123, 1143125-1143165, 1143168

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Descriptive Summary

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Language

English

Collector

Portsmouth (Va.) Circuit Court

Physical Characteristics

133 v.

Location

State Records Center - Archives Annex, Library of Virginia

Repository

The Library of Virginia

Administrative Information

Access Restrictions

There are no restrictions.

Use Restrictions

There are no restrictions.

Acquisition Information

Transferred from city of Portsmouth to the Virginia Department of Bureau of Vital Statistics who transferred them to Library of Virginia under the accession number 37860 and 37864.

Preferred Citation

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Adjunct Descriptive Data

Related Material

Portsmouth Vital Statistic Records can be obtained through the [Virginia Department of Health](#).

Additional Portsmouth Vital Statistic Records can be found on microfilm at The Library of Virginia web site. Consult ["A Guide to Virginia County and City Records on Microfilm."](#)

Historical Information

Portsmouth was located in Norfolk County, which is now extinct. It was named by its founder, William Crawford, for the English seaport and was established in 1752. Portsmouth was incorporated as a town in 1836 and as a city in 1858.

Laws requiring the recording of births and deaths in Virginia were enacted as early as 1632, when a law directed ministers or churchwardens in each parish to present a "register of all burials, christenings, and marriages" yearly at the June meeting of the court. A similar act passed in 1659 stated that "enquiries are often made for persons imported into the collonie, of whose death no positive certificate can be granted for want of registers." Few records survive from these early decades.

In 1713, the General Assembly noted that earlier acts had "for a long time been disused" and once again directed the recording of births and deaths by the minister or clerk of each parish. A return made the same year noted that the list of births and deaths was not complete since many parishes failed to make returns "for tis a thing so new to the people that neither they care to Register their Births and Burials, nor are the Parish Clerks yet brought into a regular method of transmitting them."

The recording of vital statistics continued to be an ecclesiastical function throughout the colonial period. With the disestablishment of the Anglican church after the American Revolution and the rise of other religious denominations, the record-keeping process for vital statistics fell more and more to the individual family. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, medical science began to recognize the advantages of accurate birth and mortality information in controlling and treating communicable diseases. Pressure from local and national health organizations and medical professionals resulted in the passage of vital statistics registration laws. Virginia was one of the earliest states to pass such a law.

A law requiring the systematic statewide recording of births and deaths was passed by the General Assembly on April 11 1853. Every commissioner of revenue registered births and deaths in his district annually, at the same time personal property subject to taxation was ascertained. The commissioner recorded births and deaths that had occurred prior to 31 December of the preceding year and returned the record to the clerk of court by 1 June. Information was obtained from heads of family, physicians, surgeons, or coroners. The law imposed penalties for failing to furnish or collect the information.

The clerk of court in each locality entered the information supplied by the commissioner into registers and

prepared an accompanying alphabetical index. A copy of each register was forwarded to the Auditor of Public Accounts. The law went into effect on 1 July 1853, and continued until 1896, when an economy-conscious legislature repealed the recording provisions.

There was no statewide recording of births and deaths between 1896 and 1912. Several metropolitan areas continued to keep records of births and deaths for all or part of the period between 1896 and 1912. Systematic statewide registration began again in June 1912.

Scope and Content

Portsmouth (Va.) Death Records, 1881-1970, consist of death certificates and registers.

Information is occasionally missing from the records. If an infant had not been named at the time of birth or death, the entry would record only the surname or note "Smith, infant."

Index Terms

Corporate Names:

Portsmouth (Va.) Circuit Court

Subjects:

Public records -- Virginia -- Portsmouth

Geographical Names:

Portsmouth (Va.) -- History

Portsmouth (Va.) -- Genealogy

Genre and Form Terms:

Death records -- Virginia -- Portsmouth

Local government records -- Virginia -- Portsmouth

Vital statistics -- Virginia -- Portsmouth

Arrangement

Arranged chronologically.