

# A Guide to the Brunswick County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1801-1947

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A Collection in the Library of Virginia  
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2011

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## History

**Processed by:** Ed Jordan

## Title Statement

A Guide to the Brunswick County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1801-1947

**Subtitle:** Brunswick County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1801-1947

**Author:** Greg Crawford

## Publication Statement

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## Profile Description

**Creation:** Machine-readable finding aid derived from being created directly into EAD, created by Greg Crawford, 11 May 2011

**Language Usage:** Description is in English

## Revision Description

**2013-11-21** Converted to schema conforming EAD by dtd2schema.vh.xsl.

## Descriptive Summary

### Language

English

### Collector

Brunswick County (Va.) Circuit Court

### Physical Characteristics

1.13 cubic feet (3 boxes)

### Location

Library of Virginia

### Repository

The Library of Virginia

## Administrative Information

## Access Restrictions

[IN PROCESS] Brunswick County Coroners' Inquisitions, 1801-1947, are digitized and available through the [Library of Virginia Digital Discovery](#) as the Coroners' Inquisitions Digital Collection. Please use digital images.

## Use Restrictions

There are no restrictions.

## Acquisition Information

These records came to the Library of Virginia in a transfer of court records from Brunswick County in an undated accession.

## Processing Information

Brunswick County Coroners Inquisitions 1801-1947 were processed around 2011 by Ed Jordan for the purpose of inclusion in Virginia Untold. Therefore, at the time of processing, pre-1865 records related to free and enslaved Black and multiracial individuals were identified and indexed or the purposes of digitizing them for the digital project Virginia Untold: The African American Narrative.

In Fall 2024 the remaining pre-1865 inquests and remaining post-1865 inquests were processed and indexed by M. Mason.

Encoded by C. Underwood, 2011; updated by M. Mason, October 2024.

## Preferred Citation

Brunswick County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1801-1947. Local government records collection, Brunswick County Court Records. The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Va.

# Adjunct Descriptive Data

## Related Material

See also: [Brunswick County \(Va.\) Health and Medical Records, 1799-1901](#).

See also: [Brunswick County \(Va.\) Judgments, 1782-1971 \(bulk 1782-1944\)](#). Brunswick County criminal suits are filed with Brunswick County Judgments, 1782-1947, located at the Library of Virginia.

Records related to free and enslaved people of Brunswick County (Va.) and other localities are available through Virginia Untold: The African American Narrative Digital Collection on the Library of Virginia website.

Additional Brunswick County (Va.) court records can be found on microfilm at the Library of Virginia. Consult "A Guide to Virginia County and City Records on Microfilm."

## 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:** Brunswick County was named for the duchy of Brunswick-Luneburg, one of the German possessions of King George I. It was formed by statute in 1720 from Prince George County and on 31 October 1723 the boundaries of the county were ordered to be laid out, but, because of the sparse population, the county court first met in June 1732. Brunswick County was enlarged by the addition of parts of Surry and Isle of Wight Counties in 1733. The county seat is Lawrenceville.

## 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.*

Brunswick County (Va) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1801-1947, 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.

Records from Brunswick County contain a number of inquests relating to free and enslaved Black and Multiracial individuals prior to the Civil War. The pre-1865 inquests contain many examples of violence perpetrated by white enslaver against Black enslaved individuals, particularly Black women [Jenny, 1812 November 1 and Hannah, 1859 September 5]. Following 1865, there are rather few inquests related to Black and Multiracial individuals.

There are also a large number of inquests concerning infant deaths and deaths of small children.

Particularly represented, 1900-1947, are inquests related to train and vehicle accidents. Many of the accidents involve automobiles striking other vehicles or pedestrians.

Inquests after 1930 are largely a single item, the inquest, and do not contain depositions or much additional information regarding the death.

Coroners' inquisitions of note:

There are three lynchings contained in these records, Wyche Drumgoole, 1870 March 4, a Black man accused of assisting in the murder of Lilly Rawlings, a white woman. A group of disguised men broke into the jail and shot Drumgoole; Joseph Walton, 1901 July 1, a Black man accused of entering the bedroom of his white boss' teenage daughter. Walton was forcibly removed from his jail cell by a white mob, who took Walton to Gholson bridge where the mob hung Walton; Lemuel Johnson, 1921 August 5, a Black man accused of robbing and murdering a local white postmaster. A mob, believed to be of mostly white residents, overpowered the jail guards transferring Johnson. The mob took Johnson, and hung him. [ See: [Racial Terror: Lynching in Virginia for more information](#) ]

## Arrangement

This collection is arranged

- Series I: Coroners Inquisitions, 1801-1947, chronological by date coroner filed inquisition in the local court.

## Content List

# **Series I: Coroners Inquisitions, 1807-1947**

## **Extent**

3 boxes

**Physical Location** Library of Virginia

## **Arrangement**

chronological by date coroner filed inquisition in the local court.

**Barcode number 1208495: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1801-1895**

**Barcode number 1208496: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1896-1937**

**Barcode number 1208497: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1938-1947**

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