

A Guide to the Bedford County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1813-1899

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A Collection in the Library of Virginia
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2011

History

Processed by: M. D. Carter

Title Statement

A Guide to the Bedford County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1813-1899

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Publication Statement

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Profile Description

Creation: Machine-readable finding aid derived from being created directly into EAD, created by Greg Crawford, 12 September 2011

Language Usage: Description is in English

Descriptive Summary

Language

English

Collector

Bedford County (Va.) Circuit Court

Physical Characteristics

.9 cubic feet (2 boxes).

Location

Library of Virginia

Repository

Library of Virginia

Administrative Information

Access Restrictions

Bedford County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1813-1899, are digitized and available through the [Library of Virginia Digital Discovery](#) as the Coroners' Inquisitions Digital Collection

Use Restrictions

There are no restrictions.

Acquisition Information

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

Processing Information

Bedford County Coroners' Inquisitions were processed and indexed as two separate units. The bulk of the records were processed in 2011 for the purpose of inclusion in Virginia Untold. Therefore, at the time of processing, pre-1865 records related to free and enslaved and free Black and Multiracial individuals were isolated and indexed for the purposes of digitizing them for the digital project Virginia Untold: The African American Narrative. In June 2024, the remaining pre-1865 and post-1865 inquests were indexed by M. Long.

Encoded by G. Crawford, 2011; updated by M. Long, July 2024.

Preferred Citation

Bedford County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1813-1899. Local government records collection, Bedford County Court Records. The Library of Virginia, Richmond, VA 23219.

Adjunct Descriptive Data

Related Material

Records related to enslaved and free Black and Multiracial individuals of Bedford County and other localities are available through [Virginia Untold: The African American Narrative](#) on the Library of Virginia website.

Additional Bedford County 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: Bedford County was named probably for John Russell, fourth duke of Bedford, who served as secretary of state for the southern department from 1748 to 1751 and had general supervision of colonial affairs. It was formed from Lunenburg County in 1753, and parts of Albemarle and Lunenburg Counties were added in 1755. The county court first met on 5 May 1754. The county seat is the city of Bedford.

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.

Bedford County (Va) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1813-1899, 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 Bedford County contain a fairly large number of inquests relating to enslaved and free Black and Multiracial individuals. Regardless of race, many of the deaths resulted from train and railway accidents, particularly in relation to the Norfolk and Western Railroad Company (N&W). This was likely due to proximity to the N&W Railroad Company's headquarters in Roanoke, Virginia. A large portion of these records relate to intentional homicides and infanticides, including the 1888 murders of the Whitten family at the behest of their father, Quinnie Whitten. Of particular note was the 1885 inquisition into the death of H. H. Terry, who was killed in a likely lynching.

Other notable records include inquisitions into the 1847 deaths of Ephraim and Sawney, two "runaway" enslaved men who died as a result of their efforts to excavate a "hiding place."

Arrangement

This collection is arranged into the following series:

- Series I: Coroners Inquisitions, 1813-1899, chronological by date coroner filed inquisition in the local court.

Contents List

Series I: Coroners Inquisitions, 1813-1899

Extent

.9 cubic feet (2 boxes)

Physical Location Library of Virginia

Arrangement

Chronological by date coroner filed inquisition in the local court.

Barcode number 0007285700: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1813-1884

Barcode number 0007285701: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1885-1899