

# A Guide to the Petersburg (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1807-1947

Petersburg (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1807-1947  
1807-1947



A Collection in the Library of Virginia 0007298736, 0007298738, 0007298741, 0007298743-0007298756

Library of Virginia

2011

**Author:** Greg Crawford

## History

**Processed by:** Mary Dean Carter

## Title Statement

A Guide to the Petersburg (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1807-1947

**Subtitle:** Petersburg (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1807-1947

**Collection:** 0007298736, 0007298738, 0007298741, 0007298743-0007298756

**Author:** Greg Crawford

## Publication Statement

**Date:** © 2011 By The Library of Virginia. All Rights Reserved.

**Publisher:** Library of Virginia

[Conditions of Use](#)

## Profile Description

**Creation:** Machine-readable finding aid derived from being created directly into EAD, created by Greg Crawford, 27 October 2011

**Language Usage:** Description is in English

## Revision Description

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

## Descriptive Summary

### Barcode numbers

10007298736, 0007298738, 0007298741, 0007298743-0007298756

### Language

English

### Collector

Petersburg (Va.) Circuit Court

### Physical Characteristics

7.65 cu. ft. (17 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 shipments of court records from Petersburg.

**Preferred Citation**

Petersburg (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1807-1947. Local government records collection, Petersburg (City) Court Records. The Library of Virginia, Richmond, VA 23219.

## Historical Information

The city of Petersburg was formed from parts of Dinwiddie, Prince George, and Chesterfield Counties. A garrison and fur trading post called Fort Henry was established there in 1645 on the site of the Indian town Appamattuck. The present name, suggested in 1733 by William Byrd (1674-1744), honors Peter Jones, Byrd's companion on expeditions into the Virginia backcountry. Petersburg was established in 1748 and incorporated as a town in 1784. In the latter year the towns of Blandford, Pocahontas, and Ravenscroft were added to Petersburg. It was incorporated as a city in 1850.

The separate office of coroner appeared in Virginia about 1660. The judicial duty of the office is to hold inquisitions in cases when persons meet sudden, violent, unnatural or suspicious death, or death without medical attendance. The coroner would summon a jury to assist him in determining cause of death. Prior to November 1877, the jurors numbered twelve. Between November 1877 and March 1926, the jurors numbered six. The jury viewed the body of the deceased and heard the testimony of witnesses. The coroner was required to write down witness testimony. After seeing and hearing the evidence, the jury delivered in writing to the coroner their conclusion concerning cause of death referred to as the inquisition. After March 1926, only the coroner determined cause of death. He could require physicians to assist him with determining cause of death. If a criminal act was determined to be the cause of death, the coroner was to deliver the guilty person to the sheriff and the coroners' inquests would be used as evidence in the criminal trial.

## Scope and Content

Petersburg (Va) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1807-1947, are 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 coroners' inquisitions include murder, infanticide, suicide, domestic violence, exposure to elements, drownings, train accidents, automobile accidents, and natural causes, or as commonly referred to in the 19th century, visitation by God. Documents commonly found in coroners' inquests include the inquisition, depositions, and summons. Criminal papers such as recognizance bonds can be found in coroner inquisitions. 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 deceased was African American, the inquest would identify the deceased as a slave or free person if known. If the deceased was a slave, the inquest would include, if known, the name of the slaveowner and the slaveowner's residence. Information found in the depositions include the name of the deponent and his or her account of the circumstances that led to the death of the deceased. Slaves were deponents in coroner investigations.

## Index Terms

**Corporate Names:**

Petersburg (Va.) Circuit Court

## Subjects:

African Americans--History  
Coroners--Virginia--Petersburg  
Death--Causes--Virginia--Petersburg  
Free African Americans--Virginia--Petersburg  
Infanticide--Virginia--Petersburg  
Murder--Investigation--Virginia--Petersburg  
Murder victims--Virginia--Petersburg  
Slaveholders--Virginia--Petersburg  
Slaves--Virginia--Petersburg  
Suicide--Virginia--Petersburg  
Women--Virginia--Petersburg

## Geographical Names:

Petersburg (Va.)--History

## Genre and Form Terms:

Death records--Virginia--Petersburg  
Local government records--Virginia--Petersburg  
Reports--Virginia--Petersburg

## Arrangement

Chronological by date coroner filed inquisition in the court.

## Selected Coroners' Inquisitions of Interest

### **1826 April 2, Death of unknown black male:**

#### **Scope and Content**

Black male, died a natural death, hospital used subject for dissection research. "They have every reason to believe that the hospital of this town has been used as a dissecting room, and believe the person now found lying in branch below the hospital has been a subject used by them for dissecting purposes, and doubt not his having died a natural death."

### **1843 June 21, Death of Reuben (slave):**

#### **Scope and Content**

Reuben was a slave owned by Mary Massenburg. Severely whipped by John Minetree, to whom he was hired for the year. His body was marked with many blows of the cowhide. Upon post-mortem examination, "cowhide was not considered sufficient to cause death" ... "jury concurs the severity of the whipping in giving the deceased so great a number of stripes," but believed "he came to his death from other causes ... undue quantity of cold water in his stomach, while under excessive heat and exhaustion." John Minetree "discharged from all charges of murder."

### **1868 April 5, Death of Ned Woodward:**

#### **Scope and Content**

Woodward, 21 years old, came to his death from being stabbed by Nicholas Diggs. Nicholas Diggs, Sr. testified that "when news came he had killed a boy, he was wild and tried to kill himself and I had to tie him." One of his brothers (Alfred) lost his mind at Crany Island during the War about the first year. I don't believe Nick intended to kill the boy and believe his mind acts strangely at times. He don't take the interest in the affairs around him and in my affairs that a boy like him might do. Nobody can make me believe that he had any purpose in his heart to kill the boy that he has killed."

## **1868 March 11, Deaths of John Watkins and Wright Lundy:**

### **Scope and Content**

John Watkins and Wright Lundy died as a result of a fire in a tobacco factory owned by Southside Railroad Company.

## **1868 May 10, Death of a white male infant:**

### **Scope and Content**

Infant's mother was Elizabeth Smith. Infant came to its death by the brutality of its mother; when mother was asked if it would not have been better to take the child to the father, she replied that the father was her own father, and that she had been forced by stripes and abuse.

## **1909 Aug. 6, Death of Parmelia Williamson:**

### **Scope and Content**

Williamson came to her death from arsenic poisoning. Ms. Williamson was suddenly taken ill after eating cabbage and cornbread. One doctor was called, and he thought she had "cholera." As her condition worsened, another doctor was called and he felt it was a case of poison. A neighbor asked her before she passed if she could take a few handfuls of the meal she used to make the cornbread and feed to her chickens to see if anything happened. She did, and the chickens that ate the meal died. Dr. Smith was given a sample of the meal, made several tests, and found arsenic each time. Mr. Williamson was arrested for the murder of his wife. Chief of Police in Petersburg, R. F. Ragland testified that he found out Mr. Williamson, husband of the deceased, already had a living wife in Texas. He had a copy of the marriage certificate of Williamson from Marietta, Texas. Inquisition also includes a detailed "stomach analysis" from the State chemist in Richmond, VA. He found arsenic in the stomach. He also analyzed the embalming fluid, and did not find any arsenic in it. But, "It does not prove that the fluid actually used in embalming Mrs. Williamson's body was free of arsenic. It is now impossible to assure ourselves of this, though it seems probable that it was so."

## **1918 Dec. 1, Death of Dora Jones:**

### **Scope and Content**

Dora Jones was shot by William Jones, her husband in front of Mrs. Jones' daughter, Ola. A neighbor, Mrs. Dicey testified she heard Jones ask the child, "is she dead?...I want her to die right in her tracks." She also testified that she had heard Jones threaten the life of his wife before, and that he was cruel to his wife.

## **1929 Feb. 19, Death of Alice Wells:**

### **Scope and Content**

Died from peritonitis from an induced abortion.

## **1931 March 11, Death of Lump Moore:**

### **Scope and Content**

Moore came to his death from septicemia, resulting from a gunshot wound received by Norman Daniel while in the discharge of his duty as an officer of the law. Moore had a reputation as a notorious bootlegger near Grundy in Brunswick County. Officers had located a still and gone to investigate. Special Officer Daniel said, "He was a very bad man. We do not have any in the county and worse than he was. He had been convicted on two occasions of violating the prohibition law and I happened to be one of the arresting officers both times. And the second time he was armed with the same shotgun that he shot me with the other night." There was exchange of gunshots fired, and Special Officer Daniel was shot and wounded by Lump Moore, and Lump Moore was shot and killed by Special Officer Norman Daniel.

## **1932 Feb. 6, Death of Clifton Bland:**

### **Scope and Content**

Two boys had an argument in church, Mt. Poole Baptist Church in Dinwiddie County, over a cap. Bland apparently had another boy's cap and would not give the cap back. Ernest Vaughan said "Come on and go out of doors and I will stick my knife in you." They went outside and Ernest stabbed Clifton in the chest. Clifton later died of a lung injury as a result of being stabbed.

## **1933 May 8, Death of S.O. Foreman:**

### **Scope and Content**

Foreman came to his death by being struck by an automobile. Several witnesses testified that last seen, Mr. Foreman was very intoxicated. Mr. Willcox testified he had been "drinking considerably." It was a rainy night, and after helping him put on a slicker, Mr. Willcox offered to call a cab for him. Mr. Foreman refused, so Mr. Willcox offered to walk with him if he would wait until it stopped raining. Mr. Foreman replied, "I am old enough and ugly enough to go by myself." He was later struck and killed by a car.

## **1939 Aug. 8, Death of Carl Shelley:**

### **Scope and Content**

Shelley was stabbed by Charlie Graves. An argument between the "City boys" and the "Country boys," turned deadly when Charlie Graves stabbed Carl Shelley. Sgt. Curtis stated "there were 75-100 Negroes out there running after these boys." He also said, "It would be impossible for me to say who was there, because it was a regular riot. It all happened within two or three minutes." The "Country boys" were from Dinwiddie County, and had gone into Petersburg.