

A Guide to the Matthews County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1867-1902

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1867-1902



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Descriptive Summary

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Language

English

Collector

Matthews County (Va.) Circuit Court

Physical Characteristics

.35 cu. ft. (1 box)

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 Matthews County.

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Historical Information

Matthews County was named for Thomas Matthews, of Norfolk, the Speaker of the Virginia House of Delegates in 1790 when the county was formed from Gloucester County.

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

Matthews County (Va) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1867-1902, 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:

Matthews County (Va.) Circuit Court

Subjects:

African Americans--History

Coroners--Virginia--Matthews County

Death--Causes--Virginia--Matthews County
Free African Americans--Virginia--Matthews County
Infanticide--Virginia--Matthews County
Murder--Investigation--Virginia--Matthews County
Murder victims--Virginia--Matthews County
Slaveholders--Virginia--Matthews County
Slaves--Virginia--Matthews County
Suicide--Virginia--Matthews County
Women--Virginia--Matthews County

Geographical Names:

Matthews County (Va.)--History

Genre and Form Terms:

Death records--Virginia--Matthews County
Local government records--Virginia--Matthews County
Reports--Virginia--Matthews County

Arrangement

Chronological by date coroner filed inquisition in the court.

Selected Coroners' Inquisitions of Interest

1888 Aug. 6, Death of two unknown infants:

Scope and Content

Postmortem examination conclusively showed that the children were stillborn, and that there was no evidence of foul play on the part of the mother. The county attempted to avoid paying for the postmortem by claiming that the two children, who were born in a cornfield, were non-residents.

1891 Nov. 5, Death of an unknown, white male:

Scope and Content

Death caused by drowning, but where and when the deceased drowned is unknown. The identity of the deceased, along with any other details concerning his death could not be determined due to the fact that his "head and face were so eaten by crabs or fish."