

A Guide to the Norfolk County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1766-1909, undated (bulk 1870-1890)

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A Collection in the Library of Virginia
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Author: Louise Jones

History

Processed by: Library of Virginia staff

Title Statement

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Author: Louise Jones

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Profile Description

Creation: Machine-readable finding aid derived from being created directly into EAD, created by Louise Jones, 16 September 2010

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

Chesapeake (Va.) Circuit Court

Physical Characteristics

2.49 cubic feet (7 boxes)

Location

Library of Virginia

Repository

The Library of Virginia

Administrative Information

Access Restrictions

[IN PROCESS] Norfolk County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1766-1909, undated, 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 Chesapeake (Va.) Circuit Court in 2005 under accession 41922.

Additional inquest of Hillary Driver purchased 2011 under accession 45354

Processing Information

Norfolk County Coroners Inquisitions were processed around 2010 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 isolated and indexed for the purposes of digitizing them for the digital project Virginia Untold: The African American Narrative.

In early 2025 the remaining pre-1865 inquests as well as the remaining post-1865 inquests were also indexed by M. Mason.

Original inquest of Hillary Driver purchased 2011 under accession 45354 removed from barcode 1208260 and interfiled with Norfolk County Coroners' Inquisitions January 2025.

Encoded by L. Jones, 2010; Updated by M. Mason, March 2025

Preferred Citation

Norfolk County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1766-1909, undated. Local government records collection, Chesapeake (Va.). The Library of Virginia, Richmond, VA.

Adjunct Descriptive Data

Related Material

Norfolk County County Court Minute and Order Books, Superior Court of Law Order Books and Common Law Order Books have references to the Coroners' Inquests and Commonwealth Causes where persons accused of murder were tried. Copies of these books 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:

Chesapeake, which is named for the Chesapeake Bay, comprises the former Norfolk County and the former city of South Norfolk. It was formed by court order on 1 January 1963 with the merger of the county and city, both of which thereby became extinct

Norfolk County (extinct) was created in 1691 when Lower Norfolk County was divided into Norfolk County and Princess Anne County. Norfolk County became extinct on 1 January 1963, when it was consolidated with the city of South Norfolk to form the city of Chesapeake. The county seat was Portsmouth.

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.

Norfolk County (Va) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1766-1909, undated, 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.

The bulk inquests range 1870-1890, a large portion of the inquests consist of deaths deemed to be accidental drownings. These drowning deaths are usually connected to the naval travel in the area, be it due to vessels colliding or falling overboard. Many inquests include the name or names of the involved vessels. Drowning deaths account for many of the unidentified or "unknown strangers" amount the deceased.

Additionally, there are a fair number of inquests related to the death of Black and Multiracial individuals. While many of these deaths are also accidental drownings, there are a number of pre-1865 deaths of Black enslaved individuals who died as a result of violence and inhumane treat at the hands of their enslavers.

After the Civil War, there is a significant rise in individuals dying from accidents involving trains from various railway companies including Norfolk and Western Railway and Seaboard and Roanoke Railroad.

Additionally of note, there are two inquests [1831 April 3 and 1861 March 3] involved unidentified individuals who were killed and the dissected or dismembered for scientific purposes.

Arrangement

This collection is arranged in to

- Series I: Coroners Inquisitions, 1766-1909, undated, chronological by date coroner filed inquisition in the local court.

Content List

Series I: Coroners Inquisitions, 1766-1909, undated

Extent

7 boxes

Physical Location Library of Virginia

Arrangement

chronological by date coroner filed inquisition in the local court.

Barcode number 1157334: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1774-1830 [Free and Enslaved]

Barcode number 1171279: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1830-1850[Free and Enslaved]

Barcode number 1171280: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1850-1866[Free and Enslaved]

Barcode number 0007900807: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1766-1840

Barcode number 0007900808: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1841-1873

Barcode number 1171281: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1874-1885

Barcode number 1171283: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1886-1909, Undated