

A Guide to the Accomack County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1801-1873

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1801-1873



A Collection in the Library of Virginia
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History

Processed by: Chris Smith and Mary Dean Carter

Title Statement

A Guide to the Accomack County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1801-1873

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Profile Description

Creation: Machine-readable finding aid derived from being created directly into EAD, created by Greg Crawford, 05 November 2015

Language Usage: Description is in English

Descriptive Summary

Language

English

Collector

Accomack County (Va.) Circuit Court

Physical Characteristics

.90 cubic feet (2 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 records came to the Library of Virginia in a transfer of court records from Accomack County in an undated accession.

Processing Information

Accomack County Coroners Inquisitions were processed at two separate points between 2015-2017 by C. Smith and M. Carter, 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 or the purposes of digitizing them for the digital project Virginia Untold: The African American Narrative.

In March 2024 the remaining pre-1865 inquests as well as the remaining post-1865 inquests were also indexed by M. Mason.

Encoded by G. Crawford, 2015; updated by M. Mason, March 2024.

Preferred Citation

Accomack County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1801-1873. Local government records collection, Accomack County Court Records. The Library of Virginia, Richmond, VA 23219.

Adjunct Descriptive Data

Related Material

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

Additional Accomack 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: Accomack County was named for the Accomac Indians, who lived on the Eastern Shore at the time of the first English settlement in Virginia. The word means "on-the-other-side-of-water place" or "across the water." It was one of the original eight shires, or counties, first enumerated in 1634 and spelled Accomac without the k. The county's name was changed to Northampton County in 1643. The present county was formed from Northampton about 1663. In October 1670, the General Assembly temporarily reunited Accomack and Northampton Counties as Northampton County. In November 1673, Accomack County was again separated from Northampton. In early records, the county's name was spelled many ways. In 1940 the General Assembly adopted the present spelling, Accomack. The county gained a small part of the southern end of Smith's Island from Somerset County, Maryland, in 1879, after the United States had approved boundary changes between Virginia and Maryland that had been agreed to in 1877. The county seat is Accomac.

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.

Accomack County (Va) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1801-1873, 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 Accomack County contain a fairly large number of inquests relating to free and enslaved Black and multiracial individuals. Regardless of race, due to proximity to various bodies of water and water-based trades/ occupations many deaths were the result of drownings. Other causes of death that are frequently represented are exposure (in many cases due to poor weather or the cold); natural causes ("visitation by God"); and homicide (in most cases purposeful murders or assaults resulting in death).

Arrangement

This collection is arranged in to

- SERIES I: Coroners Inquisitions, 1801-1873, chronological by date coroner filed inquisition in the local court.

Contents List

Series I: Coroners Inquisitions, 1801-1873

Extent

.9 cubic feet (2 boxes)

Physical Location Library of Virginia

Arrangement

chronological by date coroner filed inquisition in the local court.

Barcode number 0007588285: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1806-1873

Barcode number 0007669685: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1801-1845

