

A Guide to the Wythe County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1790-1896

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A Collection in the Library of Virginia 0007829885
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History

Processed by: Mary Ann Mason

Title Statement

A Guide to the Wythe County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1790-1896

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Descriptive Summary

Barcode number

0007829885

Language

English

Collector

Wythe County (Va.) Circuit Court

Physical Characteristics

.23 cubic feet (1 box).

Location

Library of Virginia

Repository

Library of Virginia

Administrative Information

Access Restrictions

Collection is open to research.

Use Restrictions

There are no restrictions.

Acquisition Information

These records came to the Library of Virginia in a transfer of court papers from Wythe County in 2022 under the accession number 53665

Processing Information

Wythe Coroners' inquisitions were removed from other items previously stored in a filing cabinet at the Wythe County Circuit Court.

Encoded by M. Mason: 2023

Preferred Citation

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Adjunct Descriptive Data

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 Note: Wythe County was named for George Wythe, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and chancellor of Virginia in 1789 when Wythe County was formed from Montgomery County. Part of Grayson County was added in 1825.

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.

Wythe County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1790-1896, 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 murder, infanticide, suicide, excessive use of alcohol, exposure to elements, drownings, and natural causes, or as commonly referred to in the 19th century, "visitation by God."

Documents commonly found in coroners' inquisitions include the inquisition, depositions, and summons. Some inquisitions contain other documents such as exhibits (drawings, photographs, items found with the body. etc) and autopsies. 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 as enslaved; a "free Negro"; a "person of color"; or a "mulatto." If the coroner knew the deceased person to be enslaved, the inquest should include their name, their enslaver and the enslaver'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.

Arrangement

This collection is arranged

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