

A Guide to the Alexandria (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1897-1914

Alexandria (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1897-1914
1897-1914

A Collection in the Library of Virginia
Library of Virginia
2024

History

Processed by: M. Mason

Title Statement

A Guide to the Alexandria (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1897-1914

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Profile Description

Creation: Machine-readable finding aid derived from MS Word, created by Mary Ann Mason, 18 March 2024

Language Usage: Description is in English

Descriptive Summary

Language

English

Collector

Alexandria (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 records from Alexandria in an undated accession.

Processing Information

Alexandria Coroners Inquisitions were processed by M. Mason in February 2024. These coroners' inquisitions were removed from 2 boxes of Alexandria Judgments and processed as an isolated record type.

These records have been indexed by M. Mason and digitized by the Library of Virginia's Imaging Services.

Encoded by M. Mason, March 2024.

Preferred Citation

Alexandria (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1897-1914. Local government records collection, Alexandria Court Records. The Library of Virginia, Richmond, VA 23219.

Adjunct Descriptive Data

Related Material

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

Additional Alexandria (Va.) court records can be found on microfilm at the Library of Virginia. Consult [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: Alexandria in Fairfax and Arlington Counties, was named for John Alexander, an early owner of the tract in Fairfax County on which the town was located. The act to establish Alexandria was passed in 1749. Its site had previously been known as Hunting Creek Warehouse and as Belhaven. Alexandria was incorporated as a town in 1779 and was ceded to the federal government in 1789 for use as part of the site of the new national capital. It officially became part of the District of Columbia in 1801 and was renamed Alexandria County by Congress. By an act of 9 July 1846, Alexandria County, including the town of Alexandria, was retroceded to Virginia, which took jurisdiction over the area on 20 March 1847.

Scope and Content

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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.

Alexandria (Va) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1897-1914, contains eleven 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.

Records from Alexandria (Va.) only contain a small number of inquisitions many of which are homicides (in most cases purposeful murders or assaults resulting in death). One notable inquest is that of Joseph McCoy, 1897 April 4, a Black man murdered by lynching at the hands of a white mob. Another is an unidentified infant, 1897 December 6, who came to its death from "criminal neglect" by an unknown individual. The death prompted the jury to "recommend ordinance be passed by city council compelling midwives to be registered and to report every birth they attend under a penalty of a heavy fine limiting the number of untimely infant deaths now unaccounted for."

Arrangement

This collection is arranged

- Series I: Coroners Inquisitions, 1897-1914, chronological by date coroner filed inquisition in the local court.

Contents List

Series I: Coroners Inquisitions, 1897-1914

Extent

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Physical Location Library of Virginia

Arrangement

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Barcode number 0007873171: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1897-1914

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