

A Guide to the Amherst County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1795-1948

Amherst County Coroners' Inquisitions, 1795-1948
1795-1948

A Collection in the Library of Virginia
Library of Virginia
2011
Author: Chad Underwood

History

Processed by: Chad Underwood

Title Statement

A Guide to the Amherst County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1795-1948

Subtitle: Amherst County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1795-1948

Author: Chad Underwood

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Profile Description

Creation: Machine-readable finding aid derived from being created directly into EAD, created by Chad Underwood, 11 October 2011

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

Amherst County (Va.) Circuit Court

Physical Characteristics

1.13 cubic feet (3 boxes)

Location

Library of Virginia

Repository

The Library of Virginia

Administrative Information

Access Restrictions

Amherst County Coroners' Inquisitions, 1795-1948, 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

Much of the pre-1900 records came to the Library of Virginia in transfer of court papers from Amherst County in an undated accession.

Much of the 1900-1948 records came to the Library of Virginia in transfer of court papers from Amherst County in 2022 under accession 53740.

Processing Information

Amherst County Coroners Inquisitions 1795-1899 were processed around 2011 by C. Underwood 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 Summer 2024 the remaining pre-1865 inquests, remaining post-1865 inquests, and all records obtained in the 2022 accession 53740, were processed and indexed by M. Mason.

Encoded by C. Underwood, 2011; updated by M. Mason, August 2024.

Preferred Citation

Amherst County Coroners' Inquisitions, 1795-1948. Local government records collection, Amherst County Court Records. The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Va. 23219.

Adjunct Descriptive Data

Related Material

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

Additional Amherst 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: Amherst County was named for Major Jeffery Amherst, British commander in North America during the French and Indian War and governor of Virginia from 1759 to 1768. It was formed from Albemarle County in 1761.

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.

Amherst County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1795-1948, 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 Amherst County contain a small number of inquests relating to free and enslaved Black and Multiracial individuals. Particularly represented are cases 1900-1948 related to train and vehicle accidents. Many of the train accidents involved the Norfolk and Western Railway or the Southern Railway.

Towards the midcentury, there is a steady increase in deaths related to medical conditions (heart disease, heart attacks, hyper tensions, etc.). Due to the close proximity of Amherst to the "Virginia State Colony for the Epileptics and Feeble Minded" [Central Virginia Training Center] in Lynchburg, Va., several deceased are described as "patients" of the facility.

Inquests of note include the 1902 April 6, inquest of James Carter, a Black man, brutally lynched by a white mob; and 1942 February 24, inquests of six men killed in a naval plane crash after their plane struck a mountain and caught fire.

Arrangement

This collection is arranged in to

- Series I: Coroners Inquisitions, 1795-1948, chronological by date coroner filed inquisition in the local court.

Content List

Series I: Coroners Inquisitions, 1795-1948

Extent

3 boxes

Physical Location Library of Virginia

Arrangement

chronological by date coroner filed inquisition in the local court.

Barcode number 0007289055: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1795-1899

Barcode number 0007888084: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1900-1929

Barcode number 0007888085: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1930-1948

Barcode number 000/834882: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1930-1948

Library of Virginia