

A Guide to the Botetourt County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1785-1854

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A Collection in the Library of Virginia
Library of Virginia
2011

History

Processed by: Sarah Nerney

Title Statement

A Guide to the Botetourt County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1785-1854

Subtitle: Botetourt County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1785-1854

Author: Sarah Nerney

Publication Statement

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Profile Description

Creation: Machine-readable finding aid derived from being created directly into EAD, created by Sarah Nerney, 20 October 2011

Language Usage: Description is in English

Descriptive Summary

Language

English

Collector

Botetourt County (Va.) Circuit Court

Physical Characteristics

.23 cubic feet (1 box).

Location

Library of Virginia

Repository

Library of Virginia

Administrative Information

Access Restrictions

Botetourt County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1785-1854, are digitized and available through the [Library of Virginia Digital Discovery](#) as the Coroners' Inquisitions Digital Collection

Access to original Botetourt County records is not granted without an appointment and without prior discussion with an archivist. Same day access to records is not possible. Advance notice of at least one week is required so that an archivist will have time to inspect the requested records. An archivist may determine that some materials cannot be served due to their physical state. The records were heavily water damaged and as a result are extremely fragile and can be severely moldy. Persons with mold or dust sensitivity may want to avoid research in these records. Patrons must consult with Archives Research Services prior to a visit to the Library of Virginia to view any original Botetourt County records.

Use Restrictions

There are no use restrictions.

Acquisition Information

These records came to the Library of Virginia in a transfer of court records from Botetourt County in an undated accession.

Processing Information

Botetourt County Coroners' Inquisitions were processed and indexed as two separate units. The bulk of the records were processed in 2011 for the purpose of inclusion in Virginia Untold. Therefore, at the time of processing, pre-1865 records related to enslaved and free 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 July 2024, the remaining pre-1865 and post-1865 inquests were indexed by M. Long.

Encoded by S. Nerney, October 2011; updated by M. Long, August 2024.

Preferred Citation

Botetourt County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1785-1854. Local government records collection, Botetourt County Court Records. The Library of Virginia, Richmond, VA

Adjunct Descriptive Data

Related Material

Records related to enslaved and free Black and Multiracial individuals of Botetourt County and other localities are available through [Virginia Untold: The African American Narrative](#) on the Library of Virginia website.

Additional Botetourt County court records can be found on microfilm at the Library of Virginia. Consult "[A Guide to Virginia County and City Records on Microfilm](#)."

Botetourt County is one of Virginia's Lost Records Localities. Additional Botetourt County Court Records may be found in the [Lost Records Localities Digital Collection](#) available on the Library of Virginia website.

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: Botetourt County was named for Norborne Berkeley, baron de Botetourt, the royal governor of Virginia from 1768 to 1770. It was formed from Augusta County in 1769, and part of Rockbridge County was added in 1785.

Lost Locality Note: Botetourt County is one of Virginia's Lost Records Localities. On 1970 December 15, a fire gutted the Botetourt County courthouse in Fincastle, Virginia. The court records were not burned but were heavily water damaged. Many of the court papers are extremely fragile today as a result of this water damage and some are not useable. Because of the near-loss of the Botetourt County records, the Virginia General Assembly passed the Virginia Public Records Act in 1975. The act mandated that deeds, wills, and other vital records be inventoried and microfilmed and copies of the film stored permanently in the Library of Virginia in Richmond for safekeeping. Counties could also choose to send court records to the Library of Virginia for storage and safekeeping as needed.

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.

Botetourt County (Va) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1785-1854, 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 Botetourt County contain several inquests relating to enslaved Black and Multiracial individuals, particularly as the result of physical assaults and abuses by an enslaver.

Arrangement

This collection is arranged into the following series:

- Series I: Coroners Inquisitions, 1785-1854, chronological by date coroner filed inquisition in the local court.

Contents List

Series I: Coroners Inquisitions, 1785-1854

Extent

.23 cubic feet (1 box)

Physical Location Library of Virginia

Arrangement

Chronological by date coroner filed inquisition in the local court.

Barcode number 0007297199: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1785-1854

Library of Virginia