

A Guide to the Highland County (Va.) Registers of Births and Deaths, 1870-1898

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A Collection in the Library of Virginia Highland County (Va.) Reel 34
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Author: Callie Lou Freed

History

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Author: Callie Lou Freed

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Descriptive Summary

Microfilm reel number

Highland County (Va.) Reel 34

Language

English

Collector

Highland County (Va.) Circuit Court.

Physical Characteristics

1 microfilm reel.

Location

Library of Virginia

Repository

The Library of Virginia

Administrative Information

Access Restrictions

There are no restrictions.

Use Restrictions

Use microfilm copy, Highland County (Va.) Reel 34.

Acquisition Information

The microfilm copy of these registers was generated by the staff of Preservation Resources (OCLC Preservation Service Center) while filming in-house at the Library of Virginia.

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Adjunct Descriptive Data

Related Material

Additional Highland County Marriage Records and Vital Statistics can be found on microfilm at the Library of Virginia. Consult ["A Guide to Virginia County and City Records on Microfilm."](#)

Related Material

Additional Highland County Vital Statistics records can be found on microfilm on the Library of Virginia's web site under "Vital Statistics." Additional records are noted in the various collection guides.

Location of Originals

The original birth and death registers, 1870-1898, are found in the Highland County Circuit Court Clerk's Office.

Historical Information

Highland County was formed from Pendleton (now in West Virginia) and Bath counties in 1847. The county received its name from its high altitude, which ranges from 1,611 to 4,491 feet, giving it one of the highest mean-elevations east of the Mississippi River. The county seal identifies it as "Virginia's Switzerland."

Laws requiring the recording of births and deaths in Virginia were enacted as early as 1632, when a law directed ministers or churchwardens in each parish to present a "register of all burials, christenings, and marriages" yearly at the June meeting of the court. A similar act passed in 1659 stated that "enquiries are often made for persons imported into the collonie, of whose death no positive certificate can be granted for want of registers." Few records survive from these early decades.

In 1713 the General Assembly noted that earlier acts had "for a long time been disused" and once again directed the recording of births and deaths by the minister or clerk of each parish. A return made the same year noted that the list of births and deaths was not complete since many parishes failed to make returns "for tis a thing so new to the people that neither they care to Register their Births and Burials, nor are the Parish Clerks yet brought into a regular method of transmitting them."

The recording of vital statistics continued to be an ecclesiastical function throughout the colonial period. With the disestablishment of the Anglican church after the American Revolution and the rise of other religious denominations, the record-keeping process for vital statistics fell more and more to the individual family. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, medical science began to recognize the advantages of accurate birth and mortality information in controlling and treating communicable diseases. Pressure from local and national health organizations and medical professionals resulted in the passage of vital statistics registration laws. Virginia was one of the earliest states to pass such a law.

A law requiring the systematic statewide recording of births and deaths was passed by the General Assembly

on April 11 1853. Every commissioner of revenue registered births and deaths in his district annually, at the same time personal property subject to taxation was ascertained. The commissioner recorded births and deaths that had occurred prior to 31 December of the preceding year and returned the record to the clerk of court by 1 June. Information was obtained from heads of family, physicians, surgeons, or coroners. The law imposed penalties for failing to furnish or collect the information.

The clerk of court in each locality entered the information supplied by the commissioner into registers and prepared an accompanying alphabetical index. A copy of each register was forwarded to the Auditor of Public Accounts. The law went into effect on 1 July 1853, and continued until 1896, when an economy-conscious legislature repealed the recording provisions. Some counties, such as Highland, did not end this practice until a few years later.

Birth and death registers in the Library of Virginia are copies of those records made by local clerks from the lists compiled by the commissioners and forwarded to the Auditor of Public Accounts. The Auditor turned the lists over to the Bureau of Vital Statistics in 1918, and the registers were later transferred to the state archives. The records are an indispensable source for the most basic biographical facts about earlier generations of Virginians.

Scope and Content

Information found on birth and death registers for each county changed little between 1853 and 1896. Birth registers contain headings for: date of birth; name of child (if named); race (if "colored," whether slave or free); sex; whether born alive or dead; place of birth; full name of father or owner; father's occupation; father's residence (county or locality in the county); mother's full name; how many infants at this birth (whether this was a multiple birth); deformities or any circumstances of interest; name of the person giving the information; and the relation of the informant to the person born.

Death registers record: name, race of the deceased (if "colored," whether slave or free); name of the owner, if a slave; sex of the deceased; date and place of death; name of the disease or cause of death; age at death (years, months and days); names of parents of the deceased; place of birth; occupation; marital status; name of person giving the information; and description of the informant (whether a physician, consort, head of the family, or friend).

Information is often missing from the records. If an infant had not been named at the time of birth or death, the entry would record only the surname or note "Smith, infant." Only the month appears for the date of birth or death in some instances. On death registers, the names of parents of the deceased are frequently omitted or unreliable. Causes of death frequently are not known.

Index Terms

Subjects:

Highland County (Va.) Circuit Court.

Subjects:

African Americans--Virginia--Highland County.

Public records--Virginia--Highland County.

Geographical Names:

Highland County (Va.)--History--19th century.

Genre and Form Terms:

Birth registers--Virginia--Highland County.

Death registers--Virginia--Highland County.

Local government records--Virginia--Highland County.

Vital statistics--Virginia--Highland County.