

A Guide to the Henry County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1779-1946

Henry County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1779-1946
1779-1946

A Collection in the Library of Virginia
Library of Virginia
2011

History

Processed by: D. Dulaney and E. Jordan

Title Statement

A Guide to the Henry County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1779-1946

Subtitle: Henry County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1779-1946

Author: Greg Crawford

Publication Statement

Date: © 2011 By The Library of Virginia. All Rights Reserved.

Publisher: Library of Virginia

Profile Description

Creation: Machine-readable finding aid derived from being created directly into EAD, created by Greg Crawford, 27 October 2011

Language Usage: Description is in English

Descriptive Summary

Language

English

Collector

Henry County (Va.) Circuit Court

Physical Characteristics

1.35 cubic feet (3 boxes).

Location

Library of Virginia

Repository

Library of Virginia

Administrative Information

Access Restrictions

Digital images for pre-1866 coroners' inquisitions that involve enslaved and free Black and Multiracial individuals are available on the Virginia Untold: the African American Narrative web site. Please use digital images.

Use Restrictions

There are no restrictions.

Acquisition Information

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

Processing Information

Henry 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 or the purposes of digitizing them for the digital project Virginia Untold: The African American Narrative. In March 2026, the remaining pre-1865 and post-1865 inquests were indexed by M. Long.

Encoded by G. Crawford, 2011; updated by M. Long, March 2026.

Preferred Citation

Henry County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1779-1946. Local government records collection, Henry County Court Records. The Library of Virginia, Richmond, VA 23219.

Adjunct Descriptive Data

Related Material

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

Additional Henry County 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: Henry County was named for Patrick Henry, who was the first governor of the commonwealth of Virginia. It was formed from Pittsylvania County in 1776. The county court first met on 20 January 1777. Part of Patrick County was added later in 1858. The county seat was previously in Martinsville but has been moved near Collinsville.

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.

Henry County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1779-1946, 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 Henry County contain a number of inquests relating to enslaved and free Black and Multiracial individuals. Regardless of race, many deaths were related to transportation, particularly in the early 20th century. The majority of these deaths were due to automobile accidents and, to a lesser extent, railway accidents. There were also two instances of private airplane accidents: the 1941 deaths of Clement M. Wade and Daniel Wishon and the 1943 deaths of Charles B. Cooper and W. Kern Cooper. There were also several workplace-related deaths for this locality.

Notable records include inquisitions related to an enslaved man named Sam Lyon (alias Lion). In December 1942, there was an inquisition into the death of Beverly Brown, an overseer who Sam Lyon was accused of murdering. In March 1943, there was an inquisition into Sam Lyon's death from a gunshot wound while being held in the county jail for Brown's murder.

Arrangement

This collection is arranged into the following series:

- Series I: Coroners Inquisitions, 1779-1946, chronological by date coroner filed inquisition in the local court.

Contents List

Series I: Coroners Inquisitions, 1779-1946

Extent

1.35 cubic feet (3 boxes)

Physical Location Library of Virginia

Arrangement

Chronological by date coroner filed inquisition in the local court.

Barcode number 0007301225: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1779-1909

Barcode number 0007301227: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1910-1933

Barcode number 0007301228: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1934-1946