

A Guide to the Rockbridge County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1862-1911

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1862-1911

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Rockbridge County (Va.) Circuit Court

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Location

Library of Virginia

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The Library of Virginia

Administrative Information

Access Restrictions

There are no restrictions.

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There are no restrictions.

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Historical Information

Rockbridge County was named for Natural Bridge, an exceptional formation located in the county. The county was formed from Augusta and Botetourt Counties in 1778, and another part of Botetourt was added later.

The separate office of coroner appeared in Virginia about 1660. The judicial duty of the office is to hold inquisitions in cases when persons meet sudden, violent, unnatural or suspicious death, or death without medical attendance. The coroner would summon a jury to assist him in determining cause of death. Prior to November 1877, the jurors numbered twelve. Between November 1877 and March 1926, the jurors numbered six. The jury viewed the body of the deceased and heard the testimony of witnesses. The coroner was required to write down witness testimony. After seeing and hearing the evidence, the jury delivered in writing to the coroner their conclusion concerning cause of death referred to as the inquisition. After March 1926, only the coroner determined cause of death. He could require physicians to assist him with determining cause of death. If a criminal act was determined to be the cause of death, the coroner was to deliver the guilty person to the sheriff and the coroners' inquests would be used as evidence in the criminal trial.

Scope and Content

Rockbridge County (Va) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1862-1911, are 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 coroners' inquisitions include murder, infanticide, suicide, domestic violence, exposure to elements, drownings, train accidents, automobile accidents, and natural causes, or as commonly referred to in the 19th century, visitation by God. Documents commonly found in coroners' inquests include the inquisition, depositions, and summons. Criminal papers such as recognizance bonds can be found in coroner inquisitions. 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 deceased was African American, the inquest would identify the deceased as a slave or free person if known. If the deceased was a slave, the inquest would include, if known, the name of the slaveowner and the slaveowner's residence. Information found in the depositions include the name of the deponent and his or her account of the circumstances that led to the death of the deceased. Slaves were deponents in coroner investigations.

Index Terms

Corporate Names:

Rockbridge County (Va.) Circuit Court

Subjects:

African Americans--History

Coroners--Virginia--Rockbridge County

Death--Causes--Virginia--Rockbridge County

Free African Americans--Virginia--Rockbridge County

Infanticide--Virginia--Rockbridge County

Murder--Investigation--Virginia--Rockbridge County

Murder victims--Virginia--Rockbridge County
Suicide--Virginia--Rockbridge County
Women--Virginia--Rockbridge County

Geographical Names:

Rockbridge County (Va.)--History

Genre and Form Terms:

Death records--Virginia--Rockbridge County
Local government records--Virginia--Rockbridge County
Reports--Virginia--Rockbridge County

Arrangement

Chronological by date coroner filed inquisition in the court.

Selected Coroners' Inquisitions of Interest

1866 November 16, Death of William Medley:

Scope and Content

Medley, a black male, died from the effects of a gunshot wound inflicted by Dr. Watson. Watson was angry with Medley for breaking the wheel on his carriage.

1866 May 12, Death of an unknown infant:

Scope and Content

The deceased was the child of Hannah Madison, a freedwoman. Madison gave birth to the child in secret, then threw it from the upper porch of Mr. Lewis' house onto the walkway below where it died. She later picked up the child's body and concealed it in a trunk.

1866 October 9, Death of Patrick Thompson:

Scope and Content

Thompson, a black man, was shot by J.C. Johnston, a white man after Johnston accused Thompson of insulting him. Witnesses to the incident tried to convince Johnston to simply hit Thompson in the head with a rock, but Johnston borrowed a pistol and shot him instead. Jurors decided it was a case of "felonious homicide."

1885 April 14, Death of H. Addison Withers:

Scope and Content

Died after being run over by the "regular mail train" while drunk. Jurors decided that neither the railroad nor the train officers was at fault for the incident since Withers was under the influence of liquor at the time.

1886 July 23, Death of J.W. Shannon:

Scope and Content

Suicide. Died after shooting himself twice, once in the chest and once in the head. Acquaintances described him as "broken down from hard work and melancholy." Inquest includes the text of Shannon's suicide note in which he describes himself as selfish and warns others not to follow in his footsteps.

1886 November 4, Death of James Gibson:

Scope and Content

Jurors decided that Gibson died of natural causes. The doctor who examined him post mortem thought he was poisoned. From testimony given in the inquest, the cause of death sounds like a heart attack or heart

disease.

1890 December 15, Death of Stephen Nicholas:

Scope and Content

Died after being caught in the machinery at the Buena Vista Paper Company's Mill. Jurors decided that the accident was a result of Nicholas' own negligence because he put himself "in a position where his duty did not call him and where he had been positively forbidden to go."

1890 September 26, Death of W. T. Taliaferro:

Scope and Content

Taliaferro, a cadet at the Virginia Military Institute (VMI), died from "apoplexy" after participating in a fistfight with another cadet.

1906 August 6, Death of Minnie Jones:

Scope and Content

According to the inquest, "death was suicidal and produced by the taking of laudanum poison, the bottle which contained the said laudanum being found on a table in the room in which the deed was committed and near the bed upon which she was found."

1907 December 26, Death of Walter Scott:

Scope and Content

Scott, a young boy between the ages of six and seven, died on Christmas Day after drinking a hot toddy given to him by his father. The jury concluded that the "whiskey was given without malicious intent."

1909 March 22, Death of Thomas E. Drawbond:

Scope and Content

Drawbond died as the result of gunshot wounds inflicted by "some one unknown." His dead body was then "placed upon the railroad tracks, and thereby mutilated by a freight train."