

A Guide to the Highland County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1864-1924

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1864-1924

A Collection in the Library of Virginia
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2012

Author: Laura Travis

History

Processed by: Library of Virginia staff

Title Statement

A Guide to the Highland County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1864-1924

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Author: Laura Travis

Publication Statement

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Profile Description

Creation: Machine-readable finding aid derived from being created directly into EAD, created by Laura Travis, 10 January 2012

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

Highland County (Va.) Circuit Court

Physical Characteristics

.45 cubic feet (1 box)

Location

Library of Virginia

Repository

The Library of Virginia

Administrative Information

Access Restrictions

There are no restrictions.

Use Restrictions

There are no restrictions.

Acquisition Information

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

Processing Information

Highland County coroners were processed around 2012 by Local Records staff. These records were indexed in February 2026 by M. Mason for the purposes of the Coroners' Inquisitions Digital Collection.

Encoded by L. Travis 2012; Updated by M. Mason, March 2026

Preferred Citation

Highland County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1864-1924. Local government records collection, Highland County Court Records. The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Va.

Adjunct Descriptive Data

Related Material

Additional Highland 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: Highland County was named for its mountainous terrain. It was formed from Bath and Pendleton Counties in 1847.

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.

Highland County (Va) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1864-1924, 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.

There are only twenty inquest for this locality, and includes a lynching, 1884 January 14, of E.D. Atchison, a white man. Atchinson died by being taken from the Highland Co. Jail by a mob of ten armed men; immediate cause of death was a gunshot wound after he had been hanged by the neck from a tree. The inquest also includes testimony stating that the men wore "disguises" and "lynched" Atchison.

Arrangement

This collection is arranged

- Series I: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1864-1924, Chronological by date coroner filed inquisition in the court.

Contents List

Series I: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1864-1924

Extent

1 box

Physical Location Library of Virginia

Barcode number 0007310625: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1864-1924

Library of Virginia