

A Guide to the Prince Edward County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1759-1946

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A Collection in the Library of Virginia 0007313244
Library of Virginia
2012

Author: Laura Travis

History

Processed by: Laura Travis

Title Statement

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Subtitle: Prince Edward County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1759-1946 0007313244

Author: Laura Travis

Publication Statement

Date: © 2012 By The Library of Virginia. All Rights Reserved.

Publisher: Library of Virginia

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Profile Description

Creation: Machine-readable finding aid derived from being created directly into EAD, created by Laura Travis, 17 January 2012

Language Usage: Description is in English

Revision Description

2013-11-21 Converted to schema conforming EAD by dtd2schema.vh.xsl.

Descriptive Summary

Barcode numbers

0007313244

Language

English

Collector

Prince Edward County (Va.) Circuit Court

Physical Characteristics

.45 cu. ft. (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 items came to the Library of Virginia in shipments of court records from Prince Edward County.

Preferred Citation

Prince Edward County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1759-1946. Local government records collection, Prince Edward County Court Records. The Library of Virginia, Richmond, VA 23219.

Historical Information

Prince Edward County was named in honor of Edward Augustus, a son of Prince Frederick Louis, a grandson of George II, and a younger brother of George III. The county was formed from Amelia County in 1753.

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

Prince Edward County (Va) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1759-1946, 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:

Prince Edward County (Va.) Circuit Court

Subjects:

African Americans--History

Coroners--Virginia--Prince Edward County

Death--Causes--Virginia--Prince Edward County

Free African Americans--Virginia--Prince Edward County

Infanticide--Virginia--Prince Edward County

Murder--Investigation--Virginia--Prince Edward County

Murder victims--Virginia--Prince Edward County

Slaveholders--Virginia--Prince Edward County.

Slaves--Virginia--Prince Edward County.

Suicide--Virginia--Prince Edward County

Women--Virginia--Prince Edward County

Geographical Names:

Prince Edward County (Va.)--History

Genre and Form Terms:

Death records--Virginia--Prince Edward County

Local government records--Virginia--Prince Edward County

Reports--Virginia--Prince Edward County

Arrangement

Chronological by date coroner filed inquisition in the court.

Selected Coroners' Inquisitions of Interest

1797 January 17, Death of Charles, a slave:

Scope and Content

The body of James was found lying on a plank near an open grave. He had been "switched," burned multiple times, and struck on the head. The blow to the head is likely what killed him. No mention is made in the inquest of who might have killed him or why.

1848 July 17, Death of Charles A. Scott:

Scope and Content

Scott was a white male who was assaulted and killed by one or more of his own slaves. One slave, Simon, appeared near the kitchen, naked, shortly after killing Scott. He there told another slave, Rosetta, that "he had killed the old Devil."

1897 December 26, Death of Samuel Thweatt (Threat):

Scope and Content

Died after engaging in a fight with another man, J. A. Armistead. Thweatt had cuts and knots on his head and body after the fight. He experienced several seizures afterwards as well. The jury decided he died of natural causes.

1914 May 7, Death of Nancy Thomas:

Scope and Content

Died from "acute indigestion or a mixture of medicines or probably both."

1922 October 10, Death of P. B. Rosser:

Scope and Content

Rosser was electrocuted. How he came in contact with the electrical current that killed him is unknown.

1923 July 26, Death of Virginia Haeuner:

Scope and Content

Committed suicide by ingesting carbolic acid. The acid caused severe burns of her mouth and throat.

1930 October 11, Death of Davy Morton:

Scope and Content

Morton was killed by an explosion of an engine at a saw mill. The explosion blew his body over several trees that were at least sixty feet high and he landed seventy-five yards away. Upon examining the body, the coroner notes that Morton's body was "very much mangled." His face was cut and scalded and his right leg from the knee down was missing. It was never recovered.

1933 August 19, Death of Benjamin Harris Howser:**Scope and Content**

Harris was likely struck by an automobile and left for dead in the road. At some point afterwards, James Milam Graham was driving his car down the same road and saw something lying across the road. Unable to get around the object on either side "without endangering his own life" Graham ran over the object in the road. He only realized afterwards that it was a person but "stated on his oath that the accident was entirely unavoidable." After running over Harris, Graham took him to the hospital where he later died.

1941 July 23, Death of Walter Goin:**Scope and Content**

Committed suicide by ingesting strychnine.

1941 October 15, Death of Clyde Breeden:**Scope and Content**

Died from "a lick on the back of his head" which fractured his skull. Breeden also had a broken neck and broken legs. All injuries were the "result of blunt instruments and being run over by an auto-truck."