

A Guide to the Westmoreland County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1802-1939

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Author: Laura Travis

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Descriptive Summary

Barcode number

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Language

English

Collector

Westmoreland 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 Westmoreland County.

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Historical Information

Westmoreland County was named for the English county. It was formed from Northumberland County in 1653, and part of King George County was added in 1777.

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

Westmoreland County (Va) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1802-1939, 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:

Westmoreland County (Va.) Circuit Court

Subjects:

African Americans--History

Coroners--Virginia--Westmoreland County

Death--Causes--Virginia--Westmoreland County

Free African Americans--Virginia--Westmoreland County

Infanticide--Virginia--Westmoreland County
Murder--Investigation--Virginia--Westmoreland County
Murder victims--Virginia--Westmoreland County
Slaveholders--Virginia--Westmoreland County
Slaves--Virginia--Westmoreland County
Suicide--Virginia--Westmoreland County
Women--Virginia--Westmoreland County

Geographical Names:

Westmoreland County (Va.)--History

Genre and Form Terms:

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

Arrangement

Chronological by date coroner filed inquisition in the court.

Selected Coroners' Inquisitions of Interest

1823 Nov. 21, Death of John Smoot:

Scope and Content

Smoot "died from a gun shot wound to his right breast from a gun held in his right hand, which discharged casually and by misfortune and against his will."

1869 Sep. 30, Death of Alexander Saunders:

Scope and Content

Sauders died from an unknown cause, but his wife was suspected of poisoning him.

1901 Nov., Death of Lucinda Berry:

Scope and Content

Died by accidentally falling out of the bed and dislocating her neck.

1935 Dec. 8, Death of James (Jim) E. Jones:

Scope and Content

Jones died by accident when he attempted to act as a mediator in an altercation between two men.

1936 Jun. 9, Death of Vernon Elmore Davis Jr.:

Scope and Content

Davis Jr., age thirteen, died as a result of a gunshot wound inflicted by a twelve year old boy with a .22 caliber rifle at a shooting range.

1936 Nov. 15, Death of John Coates:

Scope and Content

Coates, who was placed in jail for drunk and disorderly conduct, was killed by a fire "of unknown origin" which burned the town jail in which he was confined.

