

A Guide to the Williamsburg-James City County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1908-1913

Williamsburg-James City County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1908-1913
1908-1913

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History

Processed by: M. Mason

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A Guide to the Williamsburg-James City County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1908-1913

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Descriptive Summary

Language

English

Collector

James City County (Va.) Circuit Court; Williamsburg (Va.) Circuit Court

Physical Characteristics

1 box (3 items).

Location

Library of Virginia

Repository

Library of Virginia

Administrative Information

Access Restrictions

Collection is open to research.

Use Restrictions

There are no restrictions.

Acquisition Information

These items came to the Library of Virginia in shipments of court records from Williamsburg-James City County (Va.) in 2025 in accession 54387.

Processing Information

Williamsburg-James City County (Va.) coroners' inquisitions were processed by M. Mason in March 2026 and then indexed for the purpose of digitization and inclusion in the coroners' inquisitions digital collection.

Encoded by M. Mason, March 2026

Preferred Citation

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Adjunct Descriptive Data

Related Material

Additional Williamsburg-James City 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: James City County was named for King James I. It was one of the eight shires, or counties, enumerated in 1634. Subsequent additions from the Williamsburg section of York County were made in 1769, 1852, and 1880. The county courthouse is the city of Williamsburg, and the county administrative offices are near Kingsmill in the county.

Williamsburg, in James City and York Counties, was established by the General Assembly as Middle Plantation in 1633. After the capitol at Jamestown burned in 1698, the assembly decided to move the capital of the colony to Middle Plantation, which was renamed Williamsburg in 1699 in honor of William III. Williamsburg was established in 1699 and declared a "city Incorporate" in 1722, although its actual status was that of a borough. It served as the capital of Virginia from 1699 until 1780. Williamsburg was incorporated as a city in 1884.

Scope and Content

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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.

Williamsburg- James City County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1908-1913, 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.

Several of the deaths documented involve patients of Eastern State Hospital (Va.).

Arrangement

This collection is arranged

- Series I: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1908-1913, chronological by date coroner filed inquisition in the court.

Contents List

Series I: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1908-1913

Extent

1 box (3 items)

Physical Location Library of Virginia

Barcode number 0007900101: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1908-1913

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