

A Guide to the Northumberland County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1794-1896

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History

Processed by: T. Harter

Title Statement

A Guide to the Northumberland County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1794-1896

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Author: McKenzie Long

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Profile Description

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Language Usage: Description is in English

Descriptive Summary

Language

English

Collector

Northumberland County (Va.) Circuit Court

Physical Characteristics

.1 cubic feet (1 box).

Location

Library of Virginia

Repository

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 2007 transfer of court records from Northumberland County under the accession number 43487.

Processing Information

Northumberland County Coroners' Inquisitions were processed in 2022 by T. Harter and indexed in April 2026 by M. Long.

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Preferred Citation

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Adjunct Descriptive Data

Related Material

See also the [Northumberland County \(Va.\) Health and Medical Records, 1826-1869](#) at the Library of Virginia.

Records related to enslaved and free Black and Multiracial individuals of Virginia's localities are available through [Virginia Untold: The African American Narrative](#) on the Library of Virginia website.

Additional Northumberland County court records can be found on microfilm at the Library of Virginia. Consult ["A Guide to Virginia County and City Records on Microfilm."](#)

Northumberland County is one of Virginia's Lost Records Localities. Additional Northumberland County Court Records may be found in the [Lost Records Localities Digital Collection](#) available on the Library of Virginia website.

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: Northumberland County was named probably for the English county. It was formed about 1645 from the district of Chickacoan, the early-seventeenth-century name for the region between the Potomac and the Rappahannock Rivers. The date of the county's formation is conjectural because the act of assembly creating it is no longer extant, but internal evidence shows that the county was functioning in 1645. The county suffered some losses in a fire in the clerk's office on October 25, 1710. Volumes beginning

in 1650 that record deeds, court orders, and wills exist. The county seat is Heathsville.

Lost Locality Note: The county suffered some losses in a fire in the clerk's office on 25 October 1710. Volumes beginning in 1650 that record deeds, court orders, and wills exist.

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.

Northumberland County (Va) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1794-1896, 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.

Arrangement

This collection is arranged into the following series:

- Series I: Coroners Inquisitions, 1794-1896, chronological by date coroner filed inquisition in the local court.

Contents List

Series I: Coroners Inquisitions, 1794-1896

Extent

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Physical Location Library of Virginia

Arrangement

Chronological by date coroner filed inquisition in the local court.

Barcode number 0007813841: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1794-1896

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