

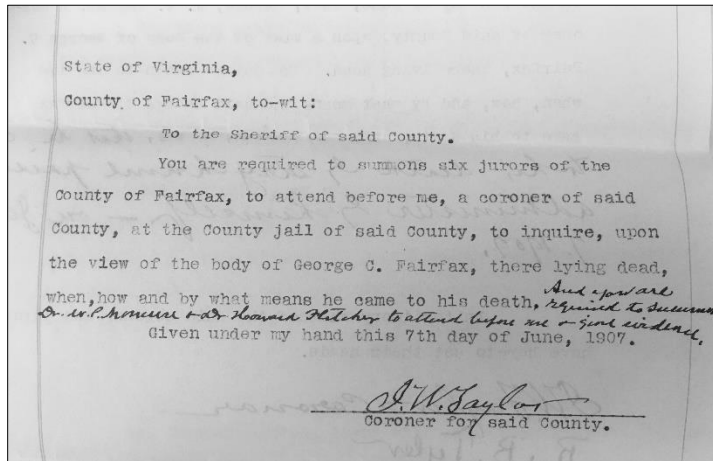
FOUND IN THE ARCHIVES, no. 67 – October 2020
Coroner's Inquests
Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center



With Halloween just around the corner, welcome to a chilling edition of *Found in the Archives*! While Halloween may not involve the typical festivities this year due to the pandemic, there are still plenty of ways to get into the spirit for those that celebrate this popular pagan-turned-American holiday. We have pulled out

some of our most mysterious and spooky coroner's inquests that also have wonderful historical information.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, the Coroner was a key official, responsible for holding "inquisitions" for those who had met violent or unusual deaths. Without the benefit of DNA sampling that criminal investigations now employ, these cases started with the *Coroner's Inquest*, in which the Coroner issued summons to at least 12 "jurors" who convened at a specific



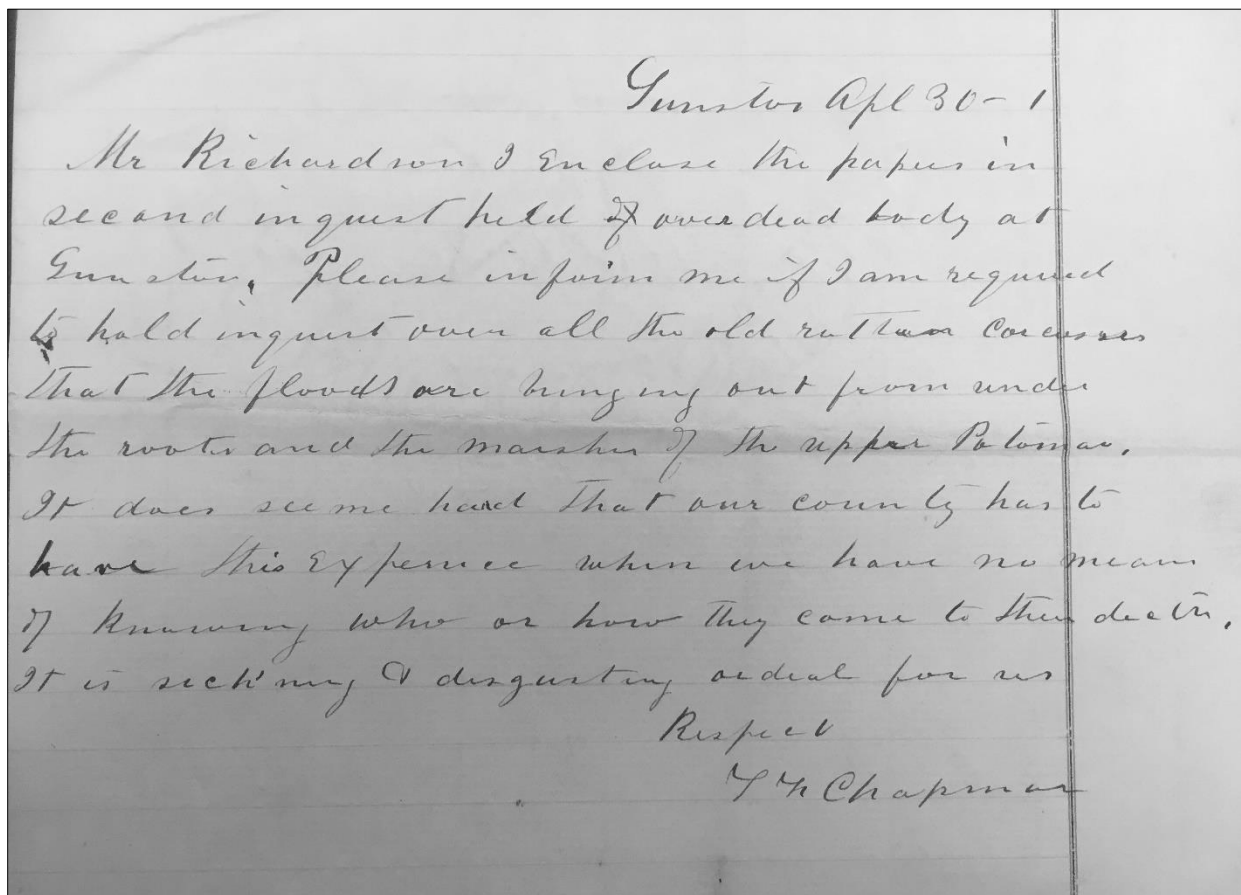
location and time, to view the deceased and discuss the circumstances surrounding his or her death. The language for this Summons would typically read, "You are required to summon...jurors of the County of Fairfax, to attend before me, a coroner of said County, at

[location where the body was found] to inquire, upon the view of the body of [name of the deceased] here lying dead, when, how and by what means he [or she] came to his [or her] death."

Together, the jurors collectively decided on the cause of death and swore an oath before the Coroner, who then delivered the guilty party (if there was one) to the Sheriff and handled the affairs of the deceased's estate. This oath and decision on the cause of death was then known as the *Coroner's Report*.

The Dead Are Out of Their Graves!

The following image shows a note included with the Coroner's Report of an unknown person found at Gunston Wharf, near today's restored Gunston Hall, the Alexandria home of George Mason. T. F. Chapman was a Justice of the Peace and one of the jurors for this inquisition.



Gunston Apl 30-1
Mr Richardson I enclose the papers in
second inquest held of over dead body at
Gunston. Please inform me if I am required
to hold inquest over all the old rotten carcasses
that the floods are bringing out from under
the roots and the marshes of the upper Potomac.
It does seeme hard that our county has to
have this expence when we have no means
of knowing who or how they came to their death.
It is sickning & disgusting ordeal for us
Respect
Yrs Chapman

His note to the Clerk reads, "Mr[.]Richardson I enclose the papers in second inquest held over dead body at Gunston. Please inform me if I am required to hold inquest over all the old rotten carcasses that the floods are bringing out from under the roots and the marshes of the upper Potomac. It does seeme hard that our county has to have this expence when we have no means of knowing who or how they came to their death. It is sickning and disgusting ordeal for us."

This would have been quite the task for the County. When identification was possible, the expenses for the inquest would be taken from the possessions of the deceased or the family. With bodies being pushed out of their graves and no way to identify them, it is no wonder that Chapman spoke of how the County might handle the volume of work. This note also reveals that there were some particularly strong floods at around April 1901, when this note was written.

The Crow's Poison

Some of our Coroner's Reports include testimonies taken of people who witnessed anything pertaining to the investigation. The cause of death for this deceased person was strychnine

W. D. Cross being duly sworn testifies as follows:

~~xxxx~~ This morning about 20 minutes past twelve, I was called in his cell, and he was suffering with something like cramps in his stomach, I tried to get him to take a dose of medicine. I could not prevail upon him to take it at all. I stayed with him sometime. I told him that he was making so much fuss that no one in the house could sleep. I asked him if I would leave the lantern up there would he keep quiet. He said he would. He did keep quiet for sometime, My wife woke me up early this morning, and told me that he was calling for water, and I thought it would be a good opportunity to give him the morphine as I had not given him any before. I stayed with him sometime, during that time he told me that he had taken strycknine, and I found the bottle that had contained stryck-

nine. I immediately went after Doctor and stated the case to him. He told me that he had taken strycknine and could do nothing for him. So far as I know any further I do not know. I have the bottle in my pocket. It is labeled strycknine and he said it was the bottle he took the strycknine from. He told me he had concealed the strycknine in his clothes when he was put in jail. I handed the bottle to Dr. Moncure to test and he pronounced it strycknine. He told me in the morning, ^{about seven up} that he had taken strycknine ~~in the~~ in the early part of the night.

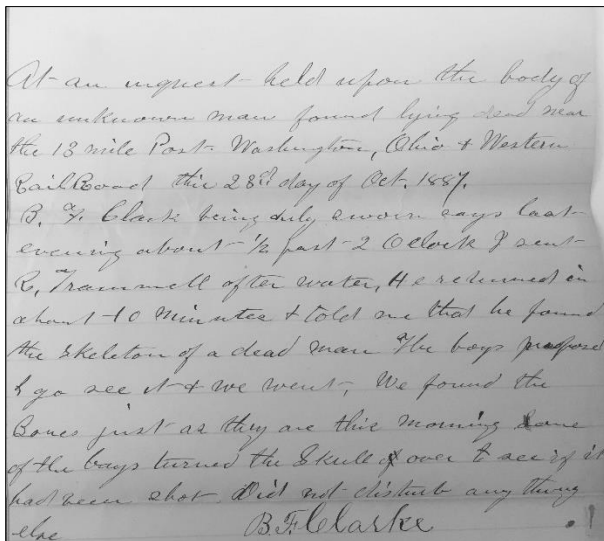
W. D. Cross

poison. The following testimony was given by the Jailor and offers a glimpse into his duties and life.

The deceased, George C. Fairfax, was in jail for murder. In the middle of the night, the Jailor stated, "he was making so much fuss that no one in the house could sleep." The Jailor, W. D. Cross, did not yet know that Fairfax had taken poison. Fairfax was seemingly determined not to see his murder trial, because as Cross describes, "I tried to get him to take a dose of medicine. I could not prevail upon him to take it at all." It was later that

Fairfax finally told Cross that he had taken strychnine. Cross testified that he tried to get help from a doctor, but the doctor “could do nothing for him.” The investigation discovered that the poison had been purchased by Fairfax’s wife for the purpose of killing crows. This snapshot into processes at a small, rural early 20th century jail offers information about the relationship between jailors and inmates, as well as how quickly – or how late – testimonies were taken after the death of the deceased, and how thoroughly witnesses were questioned.

A Skeleton with a Secret

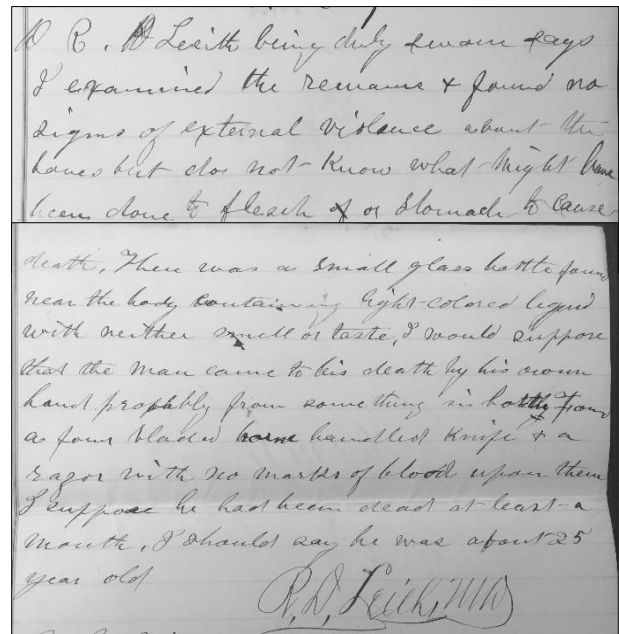


At an inquest held upon the body of an unknown man found lying dead near the 13 mile Post Washington, Ohio + Western Rail Road this 28th day of Oct. 1887. B. F. Clarke being duly sworn says last evening about 1/2 past 2 O'clock I sent R. Trammell after water. He returned in about 1-10 minutes + told me that he found the skeleton of a dead man. The boys proposed to go see it + we went. We found the bones just as they are this morning some of the boys turned the skull over to see if it had been shot. Did not disturb anything else. B. F. Clarke

This Coroner’s Report tells of an October 1887 evening. B. F. Clark testifies that he “sent R. Trammell after water. He returned in about 10 minutes and told me that he found the skeleton of a dead man. The boys proposed to go see it and we went. We found the Bones just as they are this morning. Some of the boys turned the skull over to see if it had been shot. Did not disturb anything else.” This was a frightful discovery, although one that seemed

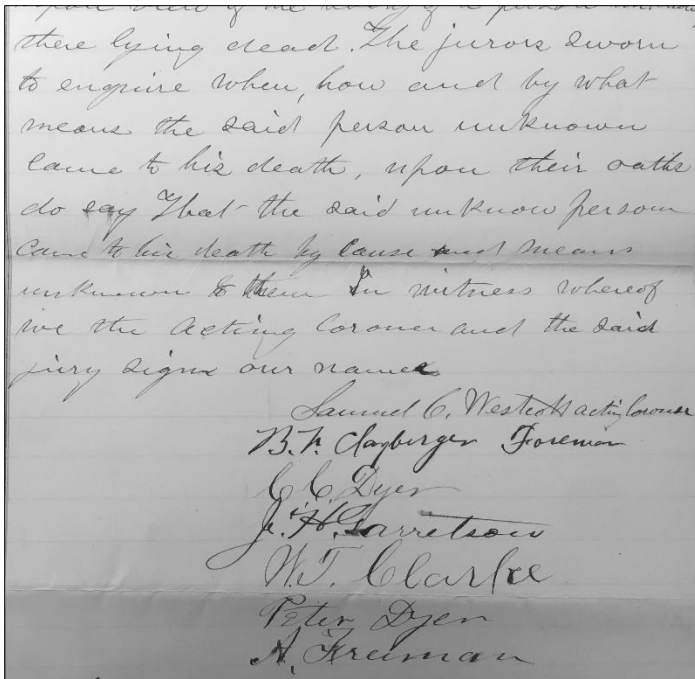
to inspire curiosity among the witnesses.

One Juror’s examination reads, “I examined the remains and found no signs of external violence about the bones but do not know what might have been done to flesh or stomach to cause death. There was a small glass bottle found near the body containing light-colored liquid with neither smell or taste. I would suppose that the man came to his death by his own hand, probably from some thing in bottle. Found a four bladed bone



R. B. A. Leitch being duly sworn says I examined the remains + found no signs of external violence about the bones but do not know what might have been done to flesh or stomach to cause death. There was a small glass bottle found near the body containing light-colored liquid with neither smell or taste. I would suppose that the man came to his death by his own hand probably from something in bottle. Found a four bladed bone handled knife + a razor with no marks of blood upon them. I suppose he had been dead at least a month. I should say he was about 25 year old. R. B. A. Leitch

handled knife and a razor with no marks of blood upon them. I suppose he had been dead at least a month. I should say he was about 25 year[s] old.”



The image shows a handwritten document, likely a coroner's report, written in cursive. The text is somewhat faded and difficult to read, but it appears to be a formal statement. At the bottom, there are several signatures and names, including "Samuel C. Westcott acting coroner", "B. F. Chapman Foreman", "G. C. Dyer", "J. H. Thornton", "W. T. Clarke", "Peter Dyer", and "A. Freeman".

The final Report declares, “The jurors sworn to enquire when, how and by what means the said person unknown came to his death, upon their oaths do say that the said unknown person came to his death by cause and means unknown to them. In witness whereof we the acting coroner and the said jury sign our names.” This account gives us a look into how great the limitations were for being able to reliably determine a cause of death, and prove a stark contrast to

today’s forensic science industry and the certainty it can offer criminal justice. The observations given by the jurors can only amount to theories. Where even today’s technology sometimes yields no solid results, our coroners of former centuries had less to help them with these cases.

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Skeletons, poison, and the dead removed from their graves make up only some of what can be found at the Historic Records Center. Coroner’s Inquests and Reports are original court records that shed light on how criminal investigations involving death were handled in 18th and 19th century Fairfax. While many of the cases are sobering to read, they can reveal how people reacted to these shocking events and sometimes the motivation behind the people who enacted murder or suicide. For those interested in learning more, Coroner’s Inquests and Reports can be found in our “Coroner’s Inquests” collection that spans from 1831-1915. The indexes to these collections can be found on our website,

<https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/circuit/historic-records-center>.

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The Historic Records Center is currently accepting researchers BY APPOINTMENT ONLY. Please contact us to schedule an appointment!

For more information about these and other records held at the Historic Records Center, please call 703-246-4168 or email CCRHistoricRecords@fairfaxcounty.gov.

