

Lesser Known Records of Slavery

Coroner's Inquests

by David E. Paterson

What was a Coroner's Inquest?

Coroner: In accordance with laws from most states, the coroner was a county officer, By antebellum times, the coroner's duties were usually limited to making inquiry into the manner and cause of "all violent, sudden, or casual deaths within his County."*

Coroner's Inquest: The process of inquiring into violent, sudden, or unexplained deaths of persons in the county.

Coroner's Jury: Coroners typically convened a jury of "good and lawful men" who investigated by examining witness and physical evidence, and finally made a presentment "how and in what manner" the person "here lying dead came to his death."

* All quotes on this page come from Georgia, *An Act concerning Coroners and Inquests*, December 22, 1823.

Where to Find Coroner's Inquests?

- State law would prescribe what the coroner was to do with his inquests.
 - In Georgia, the coroner was to deliver his inquests to the next term of Superior Court for his county, where the Grand Jury might consider possible prosecution of offenders.
 - In Georgia, inquests were not required to be recorded in any permanent record book; therefore, those that exist, are among the loose papers of Superior Court.
- Very few deaths led to inquests. For example, in Upson County, for the 50 years up to 1865, there were only 15 inquests into the deaths of slaves (and about the same number for free persons). Three other inquests name four slaves incidental to the inquiry, making a total of only 19 slaves named in Upson County inquests – *but in most cases, these are the only county documents that name these nineteen people.*

Coroner's Inquest Contents

Coroner's Inquests give us much detail of

- the manner of deaths
- in the case of violence, who caused the deaths
- but jurors were not charged with inquiring into *motives* behind violent deaths.
 - Sometimes the evidence implies a motive.
 - In other cases, we are left with sad, unanswered questions.

Example:

Upson County, Georgia, 13 June 1835, Inquest into the death of Elisa, the slave of Elijah North

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Coroner's Inquest: Elisa

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(spelling and syntax as in original)

“An inquisition taken . . . Before E. Cashin, coroner of [Upson] county upon the view of the body of Elizar the slave of E. North then and there lying dead [Names of the twelve jurors] good and lawful men of [Upson] county . . . Do say upon there oath that not having the fear of God before hir eys, but being seduced and moved by the instigation of the Deavle . . . in a certain wood . . . at Upson [county]”

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Coroner's Inquest: Elisa

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“standing and being the said Elisar then and there alone with a certain hickry bark cord which she had and held in hir hands one end there of she then and there put about hir self The othere end there of tied about the Lim of a certin oak tree hir self then and there with the cord afforesaid voluntarily and feloniously and of hir mallice of forethought hanged and sufficated and so the [jurors] . . . upon their oath say the said Elisa . . . hir self killed strangled and murdered against the peace of the State.”

[signed by the jurors and coroner]

Coroner's Inquest: Elisa

Why did Elisar hang herself?

The record does not tell us.

The coroner's jury was not charged with investigating her motives. They were only to determine the cause and culpability for her death.

The standard formula for all suicides was that the Devil made them do it.

Another Example: Inquest into death of Anabella

Upson County, Sunday, 12 February 1854

(Three slaves, Mariah, Anabella, and Patrick drowned in a boating accident. The coroner held separate inquests for all three.)

Extracts from inquest into death of Anabella:

“An inquisition indented taken at Potatoe Creek in the said County of Upson . . . Before W H Smoot Coroner of and in the said County upon the view of the Body [of] Anabelah negro girl the Property of Curen Rogers . . . [the jury] do say upon their oath that Anabellar . . . Came to her Death By accidental Drowning.”

Witnesses at Inquest into death of Anabella

Tom and **Orrison** were passengers in the same boat with **Mariah**, **Anabella**, and **Patrick** when it sank. **Fed**, watching from the shore, saw the accident. All three made statements at the inquest.

Orrison testified that the accident occurred “one hour before day,” while he was crossing Potatoe Creek with four other people. He tried to save the others, but “to save his own life he was compelled to leave them to the mercy of the water.”

Fed testified that he saw the boat sink: “Tom was bailing as they were crossing” the creek.

Tom's Testimony

before the coroner's jury, 12 Feb 1854

Witness

Tom the Proprietor of Iron Company being sworn I said that he was in a boat, ^{entering Pittsburg creek with four other men} after getting nearly to the opposite shore ^{there} after passing a strong current the boat filled & sunk he made for the shore I saw two of them ^{in the water} after he reached the shore, the girl before the inquest is one of the girls that was in the boat, he ^{was} perfectly friendly with all on board, a negro girl belonging to Mr E O Oriskany was in the boat and became alarmed, she told her to sit still & they would carry her out safe

Transcribed on next slide.

Tom's Testimony

before the coroner's jury, 12 Feb 1854

“Tom the Property of W^m Crawford being sworn saith that he was in a batto, crossing Potato Creek with four other negroes. After getting nearly to the opposite shore from which they started after passing a strong current the boat filled & sunk. He made for the shore saw two of them in the water after he reach^d the shore.”

Tom's Testimony

before the coroner's jury (cont.)

“The girl before the inquest [Annabella] is one of the girls that was in the boat. he was perfectly friendly with all on board. A negro girl belonging to Mr L D Dickinson [Mariah] was on the boat and became alarmed. He told her to sit still & he would carry her out safe.”

Coroner's Inquests -- Summary

- Not common, but rich in detail
- May only be found in loose court papers. For example, Georgia law did not require them to be recorded in any book.
- Read any that are available.

Postscript

Never overlook inquests into deaths of whites. Here are bits from an inquest into the death of Joseph McKindley (Upson Co., 1848) in which slaves act:

McKindley's son testified that "my Father & others were after his [runaway] negro man **Toby** with dogs." Joseph McKindley collapsed near a fence, dead "from the fatigue of the days labour."

Neighbor, John Pickard, "heard dogs running[.] I went to see what they were after." At McKindley's house, "the boy **Peter** came & told his master was dead," so Pickard "went to the place as described" and helped carry the body to the house.