



# The Archivists' Bulldog



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## **Maryland Manual 2006: Book Edition**



At the Board of Public Works meeting of February 1, State Archivist Edward C. Papenfuse presented copies of the new *Maryland Manual 2006* to Governor Robert L. Ehrlich, Jr., Comptroller William Donald Schaefer, and State Treasurer Nancy K. Kopp. In attendance for the presentation were Timothy D. Baker, deputy state archivist, and Diane F. Evartt, editor of the publication and *Maryland Manual Online*.

The *Maryland Manual 2006: A Guide to Maryland Government* was published this month. This book edition includes a CD of the entire web site of the *Maryland Manual Online* as of December 2005. This is the first *Maryland Manual* to be issued in book form since 2001. Available on the web since 1996 the *Maryland Manual Online* is updated daily to reflect continuous changes in state, county, and municipal governments.

The new book edition may be obtained from the [State Archives](#).

## **Washington County Coroners Inquests**

by Pat Melville

Recently scanned and made available as pdf images through the *Guide to Government Records* section of the Archives web site is Washington County Circuit Court (Coroners Inquests), 1853-1939, in series [CE396](#).

Prior to the establishment of the centralized state Department of Postmortem Examiners in 1939, locally appointed coroners, who were actually justices of the peace, investigated suspicious and violent deaths and those unattended by physicians. For each incident the coroner summoned a jury to take testimony, examine the evidence, and render a decision about cause of death and culpability of any individual. Sometimes physicians were hired to provide medical expertise.

The coroners filed the inquests with the clerk of the circuit court so the records could be used for any resulting criminal indictment or trial and so the investigating parties could be paid for their services. In many counties the inquest files are no longer extant. One exception is Washington County where the records seem to be fairly complete for the years 1853 to 1939. Even more unusual is the fact that the documents were actually recorded in the (Judgment Record) series, books that remain at the courthouse.

The inquest records can provide a variety of historical information, including patterns of accidental deaths, types of and changes in economic activities and modes of transportation, social and political commentaries, and genealogical data. Documents usually found in an inquest file consist of a description of the incident to be investigated, findings about the cause of death, date of death, and names of the decedent, coroner, jurors, physician if present, and witnesses. Occasionally a transcript of the testimony was prepared. In Washington County the records before 1870 and after 1930 tend to be rather cryptic, and those in-between tend to contain more detail about the incidents and causes of death.

Although no statistical analysis was conducted, it appears that a substantial number of accidental deaths resulted from drowning until the early 20th century and after that due to motorized vehicles. Most drowning deaths, often by falling overboard, occurred in the C & O Canal as long as it remained an important means of transportation. Other episodes resulted from trying to save livestock during a flood, backing a horse and wagon over the canal wall, and "labouring under insanity from intemperance." In 1862 an unnamed man was tentatively identified as a federal soldier from a telegraphic unit.

Motorized transportation led to accidents involving trains, cars, motorcycles, trolleys, trucks, and buses. Incidents with trains span the entire time period and include collisions with other vehicles and pedestrians, derailments, and riders and workers falling off railroad cars. Head-on collisions of trains resulted in deaths in 1907, 1912, and 1913. In one case, the railroad company was faulted for its record keeping that should have shown where trains were traveling.

The increasing popularity of the automobile can be traced through the number of deaths caused by accidents. The first one was investigated in 1907 when a train hit a car. The first pedestrian death occurred in 1913. After that the number of incidents involving cars continued to grow, especially in the 1930s. Speed and reckless driving led one inquest jury to recommend a remedy, one still echoed today. In 1938 a man riding on a running board died as a result of striking his head on a pole when the driver swerved to avoid hitting a truck and another car. "We believe both cars were driven recklessly and were exceeding the speed limit and we recommend the suspension of the drivers Licenses of all parties concerned as a way of curbing future fatalities of this kind."

Many deaths were caused by violence among individuals, some accidental and others deliberate. The coroner investigated deaths resulting from stab wounds, gun shots, assaults, and poisons. For some reason, perhaps the mountainous terrain, many people used stones as assault weapons. One intriguing incident involved a woman who shot her husband at the Antietam National Cemetery.

Especially sad were the jury findings that a mother was responsible for the death of a child, including an instance of putting a newborn in a dog house where the baby died of exposure. The jury declared the mother to be insane.

Several inquests of violent deaths were ruled to be suicides caused by gunshots, hangings, drownings, and poisons. In the 19th century most suicides were described as "voluntarily and feloniously" committed acts. In the rural areas of the county barn rafters were convenient for taking one's life. How someone could use a dogwood sapling for a hanging does seem somewhat mysterious.

In addition to the train wrecks already mentioned, accidents in the workplace resulted in several deaths. Incidents included falls in a mill and furniture factory, blasting to remove rocks, boiler explosion, and electrocution. One man fell off a scaffold while working on a tower at Antietam Battlefield. Another died when a bridge over the Potomac River at Williamsport collapsed due to faulty construction.

Other types of deaths investigated by the coroner involved exposure and freezing in a pond, exposure and starvation, lightning, laudanum overdose, abortions, asphyxiation from a gas leak, burning near a still, alcoholism, and falls from such structures as a porch, bridge, hotel window, and abandoned chair factory.

Occasionally it was impossible to determine the cause of death, or even identify the individual. In addition, many deaths were adjudged as due to natural causes such as strokes, heart failure, apoplexy, and stillbirths. Frequently used was the phrase "by the visitation of God in a natural way."

The Washington County inquests will not be a heavily used record series, but researchers seeking information available in the papers will find them helpful.

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### THE ARCHIVISTS' BULLDOG

Founded 1987

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The Maryland State Archives is an independent agency in the Office of the Governor and is advised by the Hall of Records Commission. The Chairman of the Hall of Records Commission is the Honorable Robert M. Bell, Chief Judge of the Maryland Court of Appeals.

The Archivists' *Bulldog* is issued monthly to publicize records collections, finding aids, and other activities of the Archives and its staff.

The Editor welcomes editorial comments and contributions from the public.

The Archives maintains a web site on the Internet at <http://mdsa.net>

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