



# Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

## Out of the Attic

### Alexandria coroners' body of work

*Alexandria Times, January 13, 2011*

*Image: Coroner and his jury in 1922. Photo, Library of Congress.*

Prior to the establishment of a chief medical examiner at the state level, local coroners were primarily responsible for death investigation. In the late 19th century, governors appointed the coroner based upon the recommendation of the chief judge in the locality. Not all coroners were physicians but in Alexandria they generally were, although when the coroner was out of town, the justice of the peace could act in his place.

The local coroner conducted postmortem examinations of those who had died sudden, violent or traumatic deaths. These examinations took place at an undertakers establishment, which in Alexandria usually meant the Demaine or Wheatley funeral home, which were both located in the 800 block of King Street for several decades.

As part of a death investigation, the coroner could conduct an inquest and empanel a group of citizens to evaluate the evidence. Known as a coroners jury, the six-member panel could rule on whether the death was a homicide, suicide, accident or natural, and on the cause of death. In some cases, the coroners jury assigned responsibility for a murder or accidental death by naming those whose actions caused the death. But the jury could also exonerate them if they found the death unavoidable or justified. This photograph, taken in 1922, shows the coroner and his jury outside the Wheatley establishment.

In 1946, Virginia became one of the first states to establish a medical examiner system to oversee local coroners. The state began requiring coroners to be officially qualified to conduct autopsies, and in 1947, Dr. Jeffrey D. Kernodle, a pathologist at Alexandria Hospital, received such a designation. By 1950, the local coroner system had been replaced by medical examiners, licensed physicians who had received training by the state.



*“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria’s history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.*



**Office of Historic Alexandria  
City of Alexandria, Virginia**

---

*These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by Amy Bertsch, former Public Information Officer, and Lance Mallamo, Director, on behalf of the Office of Historic Alexandria.*