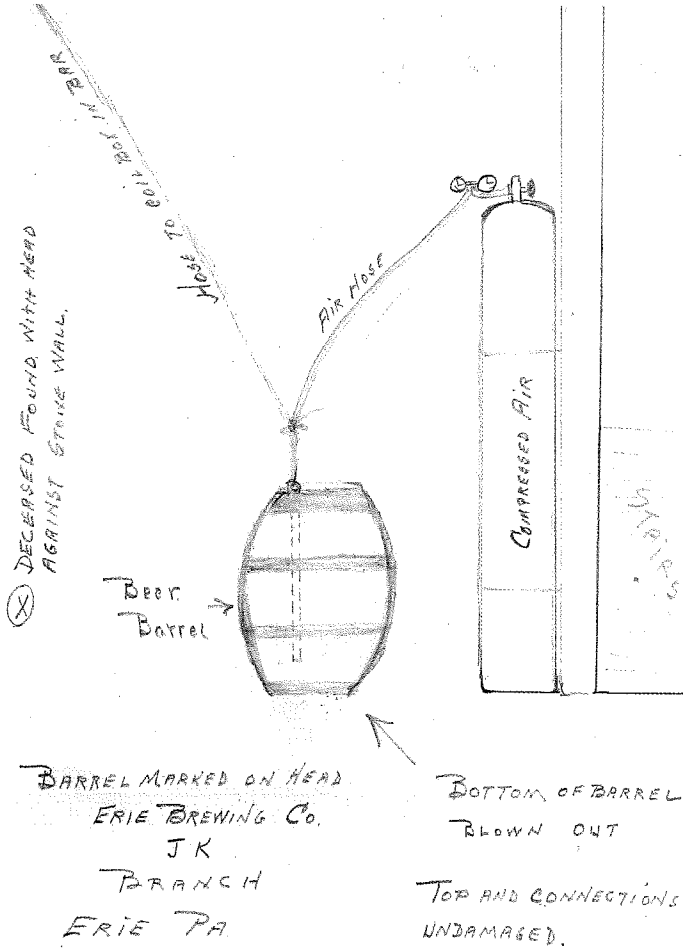


# Manuscripts

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Coroners' manuscripts and the stories they tell

# The Talking Dead: Evidence of Life in the Allegheny County Coroner's Inquest Records

ZACHARY L. BRODT

Many researchers know that public records are a great starting point for their research. They provide basic or statistical information about an event, such as birth and death records, or a snapshot of a particular time, like census records. Because many of these types of records are standardized through the use of forms, they offer very little opportunity for more information about the individual than what is requested. One set of public records at the University of Pittsburgh's Archives & Special Collections, however, manages to break from this restriction. These are the Allegheny County Coroner's inquest records.

According to state law, Pittsburgh was required to maintain information about all persons that died in the city, but some deaths required more information than what was generally collected. The Allegheny County coroner was charged with investigating any violent or sudden death that occurred within their jurisdiction, which included not just the city of Pittsburgh, but all the municipalities within the county. The coroner would then present their findings to a jury which would rule on an official cause of death for the case and decide if further legal action was required. The Allegheny County, Pa. Coroner's Office Records, dating from 1887 to 1973 and encompassing nearly 214,000 deaths, are mainly

comprised of standardized forms that were used to document these investigations, including: a case summary or press report, a proof of identity affidavit, and a coroner's jury verdict. These documents provide background information about the deceased, including age, nationality, address, and occupation, as well as a description of the fatal incident or condition.

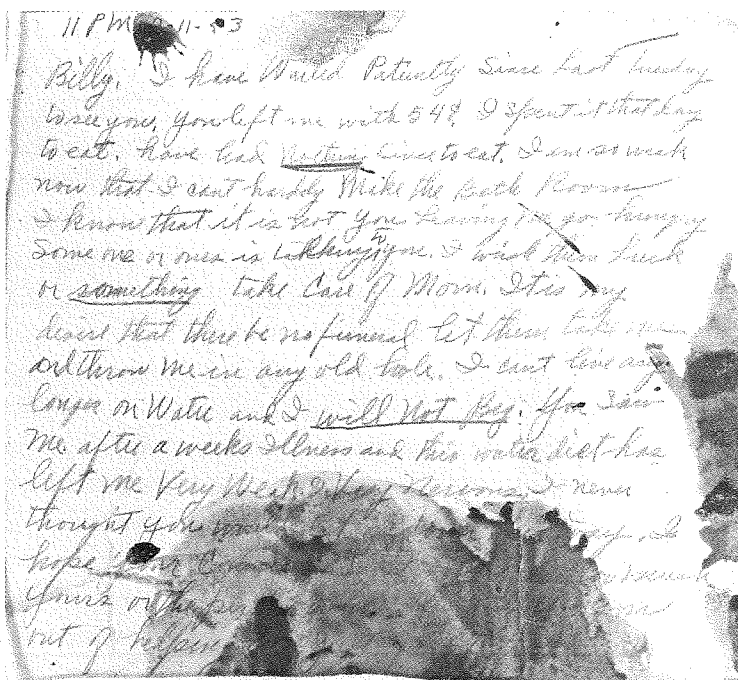
In addition, many files also include a hospital's request for an inquest, witness testimony, or autopsy or police reports. Less frequently, the files could also include bone fragments or tissue samples, bullets, drugs, photographs, suicide notes and other evidence that was retained to provide insight into the incident. These additions, unique to each file, are what often paint a more vivid picture of an individual's death, as well as their life leading up to that event. It is here that indications of a chronic illness, change in marital or job status, or other events that may have contributed to the death are brought to light.

Given the records' ability to provide such detail, this collection takes on an additional level of value because, like most forms of public record, they are indiscriminate. Whereas, in general, the archival record tends to reflect the experiences of the wealthy and educated, the nature of and mandate for the coroner's inquest records ensures that the lives of men and women from every socio-economic class were documented. Steel magnates were given the same treatment and documentation as the immigrant workers who fell victim to a fatal accident in one of their mills and, because there were simply more of them in the area, the working and lower classes are actually the best represented. In fact, these very inquest files were used by Crystal Eastman in her 1910 report *Work-Accidents and the Law*, which was part of the groundbreaking Pittsburgh Survey series, to identify the perils facing Pittsburgh's industrial workers for the world to see.

### When the Dead Speak

Some of the most interesting manuscripts found within the collection come directly from the deceased in the form of suicide notes or death-bed witness testimony. Suicide notes range from a few words scribbled on a scrap piece of paper to well-thought-out, multiple page documents that describe the last wishes of the deceased, each providing some evidence of the person's mental state during their final moments. Notes typically provide some background concerning the person's life leading up to their demise, often citing debt or ill-health, but many also simply apologize to their family for their suicide.

One example is the suicide note left by Claude Wick, a 50 year old man who lost his job as a machinist three years before taking his



The 1953 suicide note of Claude Wick. Image courtesy of the University of Pittsburgh's Archives and Special Collections.

own life in 1953. The note, addressed to his son whom he felt was being discouraged from helping him, outlines the recent struggles of a malnourished man who could not afford to eat, but still wished to maintain his pride. Wick explained in his note, which was written on the back of a pin-up poster, "I can't live any longer on water and I will not beg." An accompanying statement his son provided when identifying the body mentioned that the man was depressed and drinking before cutting his jugular vein and jumping from a fourth story window. The son also recalled that his father attempted to take his own life eight months prior to his death.<sup>1</sup>

A rarer type of manuscript is witness testimony provided by the deceased as they lay dying. This most often occurs during the investigation of injury due to illegal abortion but can also occur after the result of an industrial accident or suicide attempt. Most often, though, testimony is provided by family members or other witnesses to the incident and is either written in their own hand or by the person taking their testimony if they are unable to write or require an interpreter.

One such case full of testimony concerned the 1901 death of a 23 year old woman who succumbed to injuries incurred during a criminal abortion. Her mother explained via an interpreter that the woman confessed to the abortion and named Michael Arnholt as the doctor who performed the operation. The victim's sister described confronting the doctor and receiving a promise that he would pay the funeral expenses. Testimony from the funeral director and others, as well as an anonymous letter encouraging an investigation into the doctor, led to the discovery of a cover-up regarding the incident.<sup>2</sup> Before he could be arrested and tried for his alleged crime, the doctor committed suicide and his own coroner's inquest record is housed in a box stored directly above the one containing the file of his deceased patient. Witness testimony in his case reported that the doctor was in good spirits and none of the witnesses were aware of the investigation into his performing illegal surgery.<sup>3</sup>

### Evidence of the Dead

In addition to the testimony, reports and forms that constitute the majority of files, the coroner's inquest records may also contain maps, diagrams and photographs to help illustrate an incident, crime scene or autopsy. Other, more gruesome, inclusions range from hair and tissue samples to bullets and other foreign objects that were removed from the deceased. One file even included two minutes of news footage depicting the exhumation of a body from a collapsed trench. These items, when used in conjunction with the manuscript record, allowed the coroner's jury to have a more complete picture of the fatal circumstances when deciding the official cause of death and in determining whether further legal action needed to be pursued.

Diagrams and maps helped clarify situations that were difficult to describe with words alone. One Prohibition era file details the death of a man who was blown across a basement room when a keg of beer that was being used to supply a speakeasy exploded. A friend had recently purchased the house containing the illegal bar and the deceased was working on a water line next to the beer barrel. Included in the file is a drawing of the system used to pump compressed air into an Erie Brewing Co. barrel which, in turn, supplied the illegal beer through a hose to the bar upstairs.<sup>4</sup> Another file contains a diagram of a room detailing the position of the body, guns, and furniture to help determine whether the death was a murder or suicide.

Photographs had two distinct purposes for the coroner's office. The first, much like diagrams and maps, was to document the crime scene and position of the body. These are particularly prevalent in cases of industrial accidents associated with the Carnegie Steel and Westinghouse Electric Companies in the early twentieth century. The photos often show machinery involved in the fatality or, in some cases, the accident was recreated by someone inserting their limb into a shut-down machine. With the standardization and

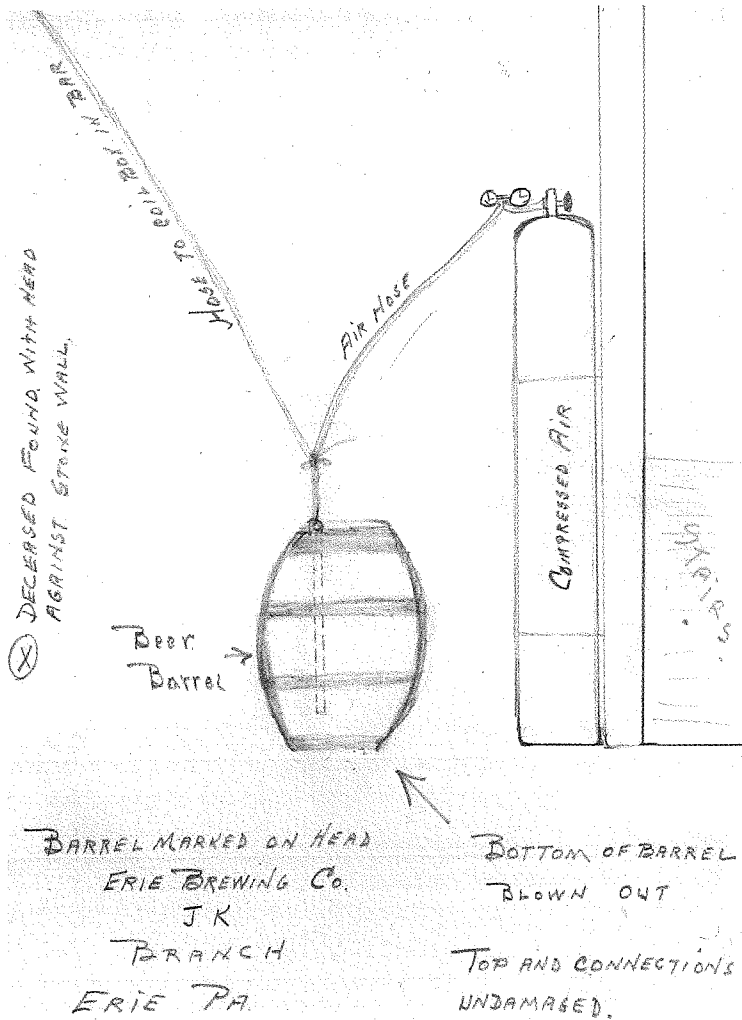


Diagram of a 1931 speakeasy's beer keg that exploded and killed a man.  
 Image courtesy of the University of Pittsburgh's Archives and Special  
 Collections.

increased regularity of autopsies, photography found its second purpose in the coroner's inquest files: as documentation of injuries and irregularities found on the deceased. These images allowed the coroner to focus on aspects of the body that directly attributed to the cause of death that may not otherwise have been viewed by the jury.

By its nature, evidence in each case is unique and, on occasion, the coroner felt it necessary to preserve those items as part of the inquest report. The most common type of physical evidence present in the files are bullets removed from the deceased, which were often kept in a general office envelope or, later, envelopes specifically for this purpose. Another fatal object kept in a file is a small piece of steel that was flung from a machine, while red hot, into a worker's abdomen, highlighting the perils of working in Pittsburgh's infamous steel mills. Tissue samples, while rare, were also sometimes included in envelopes within the files. Mainly reduced over the passage of time to bone, hair, and dried blood, these artifacts hold little value to today's researchers, but may have held the key to a jury's final verdict.

### **Famous Files**

While part of the value of the coroner's inquest files collection is that it documents people who would have otherwise slipped through the cracks of history, the records do also provide insight into the lives and deaths of some notable people and events that occurred in western Pennsylvania. For instance, along with the area's leadership in industry, Pittsburgh was also a hotbed of activity in the Labor Movement. Conflicts between workers and company hired agents, such as the Homestead Steel Strike of 1892 and the McKees Rocks Pressed Steel Car Strike of 1909, turned fatal, and the deaths associated with these struggles are documented in the collection. The 1919 file of United Mine Workers organizer Fannie Sellins not only outlines the brutality of working on the picket line,



but also a flawed justice system – the coroner’s jury deemed that the small 47 year old woman was shot in self-defense and her killer was commended for his actions.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, the records also display the perils encountered by those benefiting from the region’s booming industry. Captain William Jones was the first superintendent of Andrew Carnegie’s Edgar Thomson Steel Works and was very hands-on with the steelworkers and steel-making process. A letterpress book of his correspondence from the earliest days of the mill, which is also held by the University of Pittsburgh archives, demonstrates his attention to detail and vast knowledge of steel production, making him an integral part of the success of the new mill. In September 1889, while inspecting a damaged blast furnace with some men, the furnace gave way and he was fatally burned by molten metal. In the aftermath, Jones was mourned by his workmen and tycoons alike.<sup>6</sup>

Rust Heinz, heir to the H.J. Heinz food fortune, became an industrial engineer and had moved to California to fulfill his dream of becoming an automobile designer. In 1938, he designed the technologically advanced Phantom Corsair, which was featured in *Popular Science* and the 1939 New York World’s Fair.<sup>7</sup> Heinz’s promising career was ironically cut short when a car he was traveling in was struck by a Chevrolet near Pittsburgh. Heinz, 25 years old, fractured his skull in the collision and died a day later from his injury.<sup>8</sup> The Phantom prototype remains the only one in existence and is a popular feature attraction at car shows around the country.

Other cases of prominent Pittsburghers include Thomas Laughlin, president of the Jones & Laughlin Steel Corporation, and Pittsburgh Pirates hall of fame third baseman Pie Traynor. Laughlin took his own life in 1910 after suffering from what seems to be depression for a few years prior. The file for Traynor, who died at a friend’s home in 1972, is less dramatic. His cause of death was emphysema.

Some files even document stories that have found their place on the silver screen. Jack and Ed Biddle were part of the Chloroform

Gang which earned their name by robbing their victims after making them unconscious by using chloroform. During a botched robbery in 1901 they shot and killed a shopkeeper, Thomas Kahney. During their subsequent shootout and arrest, Ed Biddle also claimed the life of Detective Patrick Fitzgerald.<sup>9</sup> The coroner's inquests into the murders provide a complete account of the robbery and arrest; however, it is their time in prison that was immortalized in the film *Mrs. Soffel*, starring Mel Gibson and Diane Keaton. In the film, as in real life, the warden's wife helped the brothers escape from the Allegheny County Jail and the trio fled together in a sleigh. The group was pursued north into a neighboring county where the fugitives were eventually killed by police.

### Conclusion

Time and again, the Allegheny County Coroner's inquest files have proven their worth to researchers of all backgrounds. Genealogists have found the vital information and witness testimony to be unparalleled evidence of their ancestors' lives in the Pittsburgh area. Historians use the files to learn about turn of the century working conditions and the impact of the automobile on pedestrian deaths. Detectives have read through files to take a fresh look at unsolved cases that had grown cold decades ago. Looking at the bigger picture, epidemiologists and medical historians have shown interest in the files as a way to study the spread of disease, such as the 1918 Spanish Flu epidemic, throughout industrialized urban centers. While larger cities were required to capture data regarding births and deaths, it is very rare for such detailed inquest records to survive, making the Allegheny County Coroner's files that much more important. The details found in the forms and manuscripts that compose each record have preserved a way of life foreign to present day readers and, in many cases, are the closest we will ever come to experiencing historic Pittsburgh.

### About the Author

Zachary L. Brodt is the University Archivist at the University of Pittsburgh, where he also received his BA (History and Classics) and MLIS degrees. As a graduate student intern at the Pitt archives, Brodt was one of the over two dozen students that worked on the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission-funded Allegheny County Coroner Case File Project from 2007-2008. Zach can be contacted by e-mail at [zlb2@pitt.edu](mailto:zlb2@pitt.edu)

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> 195308-187, Allegheny County, Pa. Coroner's Office Records, 1884-1976, AIS.1982.07, Archives & Special Collections, University of Pittsburgh Library System

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<sup>5</sup> 191909-229, Allegheny County, Pa. Coroner's Office Records, 1884-1976, AIS.1982.07, Archives & Special Collections, University of Pittsburgh Library System

<sup>6</sup> 188909-043, Allegheny County, Pa. Coroner's Office Records, 1884-1976, AIS.1982.07, Archives & Special Collections, University of Pittsburgh Library System

<sup>7</sup> Patton, Phil. "A Dream Car Makes an Appearance," *The New York Times* 5 March 2009.

<sup>8</sup> 193909-130, Allegheny County, Pa. Coroner's Office Records, 1884-1976, AIS.1982.07, Archives & Special Collections, University of Pittsburgh Library System

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