Mourning
and
Memories

Funeral and Mourning Customs
1825 - 1935

Margaret Vandergriff, d. 1841

Gravestone detail, Hopewell Cemetery, Israel Twp., Preble Co., Ohio

An Exhibit of Objects, Images
and Printed Materials

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The "Cult of Memory"

The United States today is a nation largely removed from death. Public expressions of grief strike many as discomfiting, and the bereaved are encouraged to quickly resume their everyday lives. Other than state funerals, which are modern-day embodiments of the neoclassical "heroic death," preoccupation with death is seen as unnecessarily morbid. Expressing grief is associated with self-pity, there is little time for sentimentality and the rapid pace of modern life precludes the ability to follow most formal mourning rituals.

Yet there was a time not long ago when mourning customs flourished. Throughout the 19th century the "Cult of Memory" was engrained in Victorian social behavior. Proper displays of grief and bereavement for the deceased were explicitly codified by etiquette books and social convention. Mourning rituals fulfilled an important social obligation by honoring the dead and maintaining the social position of the bereaved. Mourning dress became part of acceptable fashion, and along with specified behaviors expressed one's class and position in the community and its society.

Children and Death

Infant mortality and high 19th century death rates suggest that death, although often sudden and unexpected, was a regular intrusion in everyday life. Many simply believed the strong outlived the weak. During severe epidemics such as cholera, childhood death rate could reach fifty percent, and throughout the 19th century the death rate for children under ten was almost one-third.

William and Harriet McGuffey lost their two-week old son William only a few months after moving into their new house in 1833. Later, after moving from Oxford, they experienced the loss of two more sons in 1839 and 1851. After Harriet's death in 1851, McGuffey married Laura Howard, only to lose their four year old daughter, Anna, in 1857. Deep in grief, the stoic McGuffey wrote to his half-sister, *"We are, ourselves, just now, in great affliction. Our dear little Anna is dead . . . The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away."*

McGuffey's Eclectic Readers presented death in a realistic if highly spiritual context. Lessons such as "We All Must Die" and "What is Death?" reminded young readers about the fragility of earthly life and the promise of afterlife. By the 1840s gloomy notions of death were being replaced in popular culture by more peaceful, romantic ideals of death as sleep and slumber, and death no longer focused on the terror of dreadful judgment and uncertain salvation. Death commemorations offered the comforting prospect of a happy reunion in Heaven, and the graves of loved ones became sites of both somber reflection and celebration.

Mourning Practice and Material Culture

The concepts of controlled grief and restrained emotion, sometimes called the "good death," predate the Civil War. Death was not to be silently suffered. Family members planned and directly participated in the funeral, and the home served as the "house of mourning." Final farewells were both sorrowful and uplifting, embracing rituals that have been described as "the beautification of death." Although public displays of mourning by Queen Victoria and Mary Todd Lincoln after the deaths of their husbands did not establish American mourning customs, they did make mourning practices more open and visible.

Nineteenth century advice books such as *Godey's Lady's Book* recommended widows spend several months of seclusion and a full year dressed in dull black attire, followed by a second year gradually introducing other colors. Black, gray, and violet were conventional mourning colors, accessorized with veils, shawls, black gloves, bordered handkerchiefs, and black jewelry. Hairwork, the making of decorative objects from human hair, often memorialized a loved one and meant that those still living were always united with the dead.
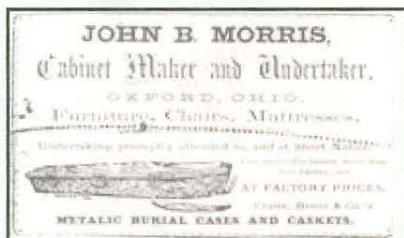

Business Card
John B. Morris,
Oxford, Ohio
ca. 1872

JOHN B. MORRIS,
Cabinet Maker and Undertaker.
OXFORD, OHIO.
Furniture, Chairs, Mattresses,
AT FACTORY PRICES.
METALIC BURIAL CASES AND CASKETS.

From Front Parlor to the Funeral Parlor

The last two families to reside in the McGuffey House experienced the loss of a child first-hand. In 1919 Donald Beard died at age 29 and a recently identified photo suggests his casket was laid out in the front parlor. In 1935 twenty-two year old Wallace "Pat" Roudebush, a scholar athlete while at Miami, died from an infection contracted at summer camp. The Roudebush family held his funeral in the parlor.

By the end of the 19th century the formality of death and its associated rituals represented a growing separation of the living from the dead. Floral tributes joined black crepe as mourning symbols and even the language of death softened. Undertakers became funeral directors, coffins changed shape and became caskets, and dead people were referred to as the "deceased." By the 1880s a greater percentage of Americans were dying at hospitals than at home. The increasing professionalization of the process of death led one observer to write *"There is nothing too good for the dead."* Funeral directors assumed a greater role in planning and executing funerals outside the home, and grief became less public and prolonged. After World War II more women held jobs and the strict formality of mourning garments seemed less compatible with changing fashion and the demands of modern life. Mourning itself had become a memory.

Selected References

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Carte de visite
of
Cornelia Cone Keely
in mourning, 1864

(Obverse)
"J.C. Toler, photographer,
Cone House,
Oxford, Ohio."

McGuffey Museum

Special Acknowledgements

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