

# Preparing for an Afterlife on Earth: The Transformation of Mortuary Behavior in Nineteenth-Century North America

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## Introduction

Mortuary behavior is one of the most fascinating and fruitful fields of investigation in the social sciences and one that has drawn widespread interest in historical archaeology. Since the pioneering early twentieth-century studies by Arnold van Gennep (1960) and Robert Hertz (1960), the study of mortuary ritual has been recognized as an important element of cultural anthropology (Metcalf and Huntington, 1991). Within the social sciences in general, the beliefs and rituals surrounding death are regarded as an important part of a culture's worldview (Goody, 1975). Historians and other social scientists have also been attracted to the study of deathways, including the beliefs, activities, and literature associated with death, the afterlife, and mourning behavior (Pine, 1975; Shively, 1988). These topics form an important element of historical mentalities or attitudinal studies. Grounded in the field of sociology, Jessica Mitford's (1963) exposé of the modern American funerary industry expanded the realm of mortuary behavior from a mere academic interest, placing it firmly in the public consciousness.

Mortuary behavior is currently one of the most important subjects in the field of historical archaeology, with approaches that range from the actual excavation of cemeteries to nonintrusive methods such as the analysis of gravestones, texts, and art. A bibliography on the historical archaeology of cemeteries published more than a decade ago listed nearly 2,000 publications and cultural resource

management reports dealing with the subject (Bell, 1994). Since that time, the number of archaeological studies has continued to expand. Not only is there a greater academic interest in this topic, but there is also a growing need for archaeologists to excavate cemeteries, as urban redevelopment and suburban sprawl puts more and more burial places at risk. Important contributions to the field have been made by proponents of the new archaeology, structural archaeology, symbolic archaeology, postprocessual archaeology, and feminist archaeology—virtually all of the major intellectual approaches that have shaped the field of archaeology in recent decades.

Today, there is such an extensive literature pertaining to mortuary behavior in the field of historical archaeology that it will be possible here only to hint at the breadth of research in the field. This chapter examines some of the more important developments that occurred in mortuary behavior during the nineteenth century, drawing primarily on work in the eastern United States and in Great Britain. With the rise of urbanism, industrial capitalism, and consumerism, attitudes toward death changed profoundly during the nineteenth century in the English-speaking world. Important cultural changes occurred that were expressed not only in popular attitudes, behaviors, and the ideology surrounding death, but also in the material culture associated with cemeteries, burial furniture, and memorials to the dead. The fruition of these developments in mortuary behavior in the nineteenth century have come to be known as the Beautification of Death movement or the Cult of the Dead.

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## Historical Development of North American Mortuary Practices

What may perhaps be referred to as traditional or folk colonial American attitudes and death rituals were strongly influenced by traditions that developed in medieval and renaissance Europe, but a number of important regional variations developed as these customs were transferred to the North American colonies. Relatively little information is available about Colonial mortuary behaviors from textual sources, as death and funerals were seldom written about or commented upon by contemporary observers (Stilgoe, 1982). It would be a mistake to assume that there was a single set of attitudes or beliefs about death that permeated all classes and regions.

In the American colonies, there was much similarity with established British patterns, as a result of direct transfer. The Puritans of New England had the most strongly developed beliefs concerning death and the afterlife, and these beliefs had a wide influence throughout the colonies. Much of the medieval view of death survived in Puritan ideology, especially the imagery of decay and physical corruption of the body that accompanied death. The Puritans equated the moment of death with a time of judgment of the deceased, and they believed that the living could do nothing for the dead other than to respectfully inter the lifeless corpse. Puritan funerals were therefore marked by simplicity, but by the end of the seventeenth century, the strict Puritan views began to dissipate, and funerals became more elaborate, with prayers, preaching, and the distribution of token gifts such as rings and gloves. Feasting and drinking was an important element of Colonial funerals in southern areas, but not in New England. Differences also emerged between urban and rural areas during the nineteenth century; a number of important changes emerged in urban areas, while mortuary practices in the rural areas remained somewhat conservative (Farrell, 1980; Geddes, 1981; Habenstein and Lamers, 1955). Much of the variation in mortuary behavior that emerged in different regions is apparently less related to chronology than to local population densities and developmental staging.

Funerals were typically community events attended by neighbors and friends of the deceased's

family. Burial of the corpse would have taken place within two or three days following death, as embalming was not widely practiced before the American Civil War. Undertaking as a profession began to develop in urban areas of North America during the early nineteenth century. Before undertaking developed as a recognized profession, preparation of the corpse for burial was often carried out by nurses. In rural areas, neighbors and friends would have assumed responsibility for the burial arrangements, including laying out of the corpse and digging the grave (Habenstein and Lamers, 1955; Sloan, 1991; Stilgoe, 1982; Taylor, 1980). Before the nineteenth century, the common treatment of the dead involved washing, laying out, and wrapping the corpse in a shroud. Shrouds were usually made of linen or cerecloth, which was wax-impregnated linen, and they were shaped like a long dress or shirt, bound up with pins or knotted at the feet. The absence of clothing, aside from burial shrouds, appears characteristic of the traditional method for treatment of the dead (Geddes, 1981; Habenstein and Lamers, 1955; Taylor, 1980).

The appearance and siting of graveyards varied by region, with distinctive patterns in New England and the South, as well as variations between rural and urban areas. Developing frontier areas typically began with a pattern of isolated interments and homestead graveyards, followed by more formal burial places (Mytum, 2003, 2004). In New England, graveyards were often sited in the center of town, adjacent to a church. In the South and the Middle Atlantic Tidewater area, private family plots were the most common form of burial ground. They were most often located behind the farmhouse and away from the principal road on which the farmhouse was sited, not foregrounded in the cultural landscape. Rural family burial plots were seldom given elaborate landscape treatment, but were simply set off by a fence, wall, drainage ditch, or distinctive plantings (Stilgoe, 1978, 1982). While family cemeteries were often forgotten and neglected after a change of property ownership, they continue in use to the present day, but are much less popular than lawn-park cemeteries, municipal cemeteries, or churchyard cemeteries.

Formal graveyards in northern villages and towns were more likely to have a distinctive

landscape treatment, particularly by the planting of trees and shrubs such as yew, holly, rosemary, willow, or cemetery periwinkle. Southern family and community graveyards were planted with cedars, gardenia, mimosas, and crepe myrtle. In outlying and frontier areas, family plots outnumbered community graveyards (Stilgoe, 1978, 1982). Elaborate landscaping of cemeteries did not occur until the nineteenth century, when the rural cemetery spread through Western Europe and eastern North America.

Colonial gravestones were seldom elaborate and were commonly made of wood or plain stone. Carved stone markers were more likely to be found in urban areas, while wooden markers or unadorned stones were commonly used through the colonial period, and much longer in rural cemeteries (Bachman and Catts, 1990; Garrow, 1989; Pike and Armstrong, 1980; Stilgoe, 1978, 1982). The spatial patterning of interments within cemeteries typically reflected kin groupings, a practice that has persisted to the present. Spatial proximity of the dead in the graveyard thus reflected the social networks of the living (Francaviglia, 1971). Beyond kinship, spatial proximity in cemeteries also occurs along the lines of ethnicity and religious denomination. The practice of interring the body with the head to the west and the feet to the east, facing the rising sun, was established before the Christian era. European Iron-Age burials were typically oriented in this way. According to Christian tradition, this orientation prepared the deceased to rise up to meet his or her Savior, who would come from the east. This traditional alignment of interments persisted into the nineteenth century, particularly in small, rural family cemeteries (Saxe, 1971; Sloan, 1991; Stilgoe, 1978, 1982).

Symbolically, coffins may be viewed as vessels designed to carry the dead to the next world, hence they are among the most important objects associated with death ritual. The hexagonal coffin form, also known as a "shoulder" or "pinch toe" coffin, was widely used in the American colonies, and its use persisted through the mid-nineteenth century. Before the Beautification of Death movement began in the nineteenth century, most coffins were simple, utilitarian vessels, made up of nothing more than a few boards and nails, entirely lacking in elaborate decorative hardware.

The simplest hexagonal coffin was built with a flat lid. Another coffin form that was occasionally used in some areas during the Colonial period featured a gabled lid. This type of coffin was sometimes built with straight sides, either in a rectangular or trapezoidal shape, with the gable ridge running along the length of the coffin. Hexagonal, gable-lidded coffins were also used, but these demanded a much higher level of carpentry than the basic flat-lidded style (LeeDecker, 2001).

In the Colonial period, coffins were built by a local carpenter, cabinetmaker, or wheelwright after a death occurred. As coffins were made individually to suit the decedent, rather than manufactured in standard sizes, the carpenter needed a few measurements from the corpse before beginning work. Only a few simple tools were needed; the only specialized tool was a marking board, which was used to lay out the hexagonal shape of the bottom board. By the late nineteenth century, cabinetmakers in the urban areas began to specialize in coffin making. Eventually, the proprietors of these shops added other funerary tasks to their business and developed the modern profession of undertaking. In rural areas, coffin making continued to be an occasional task performed by a local carpenter or wheelwright until well into the nineteenth century (LeeDecker, 2001).

It is impossible to characterize a single colonial American worldview, as there was much variation between classes and ethnic groups. Christian theology had a primary role in preparing the living for what was to come after death. Most importantly, Christianity affirms the existence of an afterlife, so that physical death was viewed not as the end of existence, but instead marked a passage to another world. With the growing influence of natural science, American and British attitudes toward death began to change during the late Colonial and early Federal period. But while attitudes were changing, many ideas and beliefs persisted. As Ariès (1974) has observed, attitudes and beliefs toward death may persist over centuries and millennia, appearing almost a-chronic.

The beliefs that death marked a time of judgment, that individuals faced different fates after death, and that resurrection or return of the soul

were possible were all rooted in western civilization as early as the third millennium B.C. in Egypt. The fear of and obsession with death reached a peak in the Middle Ages, which many historians attribute to the numerous plagues, epidemics, and short life spans of this period. The concept of hell or purgatory reached its peak of development during the late Middle Ages, and it was believed that far more souls went to Purgatory than were saved, and the imagery of eternal torture was well developed in contemporary visual art (Stannard, 1977).

The medieval preoccupation with death is illustrated in the *Danse Macabre* and the *Ars Moriendi*, both of which were literal interpretations of the decay and decomposition of the human body that followed physical death. In the late Middle Ages, the human skeleton or a decayed corpse was commonly used to personify death. The *Danse Macabre*, or Dance of Death, was a procession in which both the living and the dead took part. Typically, the living included persons of high social rank, such as popes, bishops, kings, and dukes, and the dialogue between the living and the dead conveyed the notion that all human life and attainment was transitory. Other scenes of the *Danse* portray death visiting children, farmers, and artisans. Thus, death obliterated the differences of age, ethnicity, wealth, birthright, and worldly position that defined status in the world of the living. The *Ars Moriendi*, which translates as “the art of dying,” provided guidance for all individuals who must prepare to face death. The proliferation of *Ars Moriendi* books in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries expressed and expanded the medieval world’s greater familiarity with death. In these books, the moment of death typically was portrayed as a public event, in which the dying person, lying in bed, was tempted and assaulted by demons, in the face of which the dying person was supposed to maintain his or her faith and belief in the goodness of God (Ariès, 1985; Clark, 1950; Stannard, 1977). The idea of the “good death” persisted in folk tradition, as did the metaphor of sleep, as expressed in the iconography of beds and pillows that remained prominent in the Beautification of Death movement (Mytum, 2004; Tarlow, 1999a).

In Christian theology, death marks both the end of life and the beginning of the afterlife. The afterlife was portrayed as a separate world, and the grave was seen as both the physical and symbolic entrance

to that world. In both religious and vernacular art, death was often represented as a gateway, a doorway, or an opening to a cave or subterranean space. In religious art, this imagery is explicit in compositions showing Christ’s descent into limbo, in which the central figure is departing the world of the living through an opening into a darkened underworld abyss. The ideal or exemplary Christian death of the Middle Ages was the death of the virgin, lying in a bed surrounded by the apostles. In the more vernacular art of the Middle Ages, particularly as seen in the *Ars Moriendi*, the dying individual is portrayed in bed, surrounded by kin, neighbors, coworkers, and a priest who administered the last rites. People were expected to prepare themselves carefully for death, and the dying person played the central role, and he or she was expected to die with great dignity. A proper death required the dying individual to ask forgiveness from each person in attendance and to wish them well (Ariès, 1974, 1985).

The Last Judgment was among the most common subjects found on church entrances and miniatures dating to the late medieval period. Images of the Last Judgment feature the weighing of souls by the Archangel Michael, separating them into those destined for eternal life in Paradise and those damned to eternal torment in Hell. Death was the moment at which the fate of the individual soul was decided, and the vernacular iconography of the late medieval period began to portray this time of judgment at the time of the individual’s death rather than at the “end of time” during the Second Coming of Christ (Ariès, 1974, 1985).

As science and rationalism began to take hold in western Europe and the American colonies, there was an emphasis on the discovery of the laws and scientific principles that ordered the natural world. In this context, death came to be viewed as a routine event in the cycle of nature, rather than a time of judgment for the soul. Historians have identified this philosophical shift in attitudes toward death through the study of wills and testaments made in anticipation of death. This trend was marked by greater attention to the disposal and distribution of wealth, rather than arrangements for prayers, religious services, and charitable acts that would ensure the salvation of the soul. This attitudinal change, described as “dechristianization” (Goody,

1975) or “secularization” (Ariès, 1974) began first among the elite classes, but eventually permeated western society as a whole (Gittings, 1992).

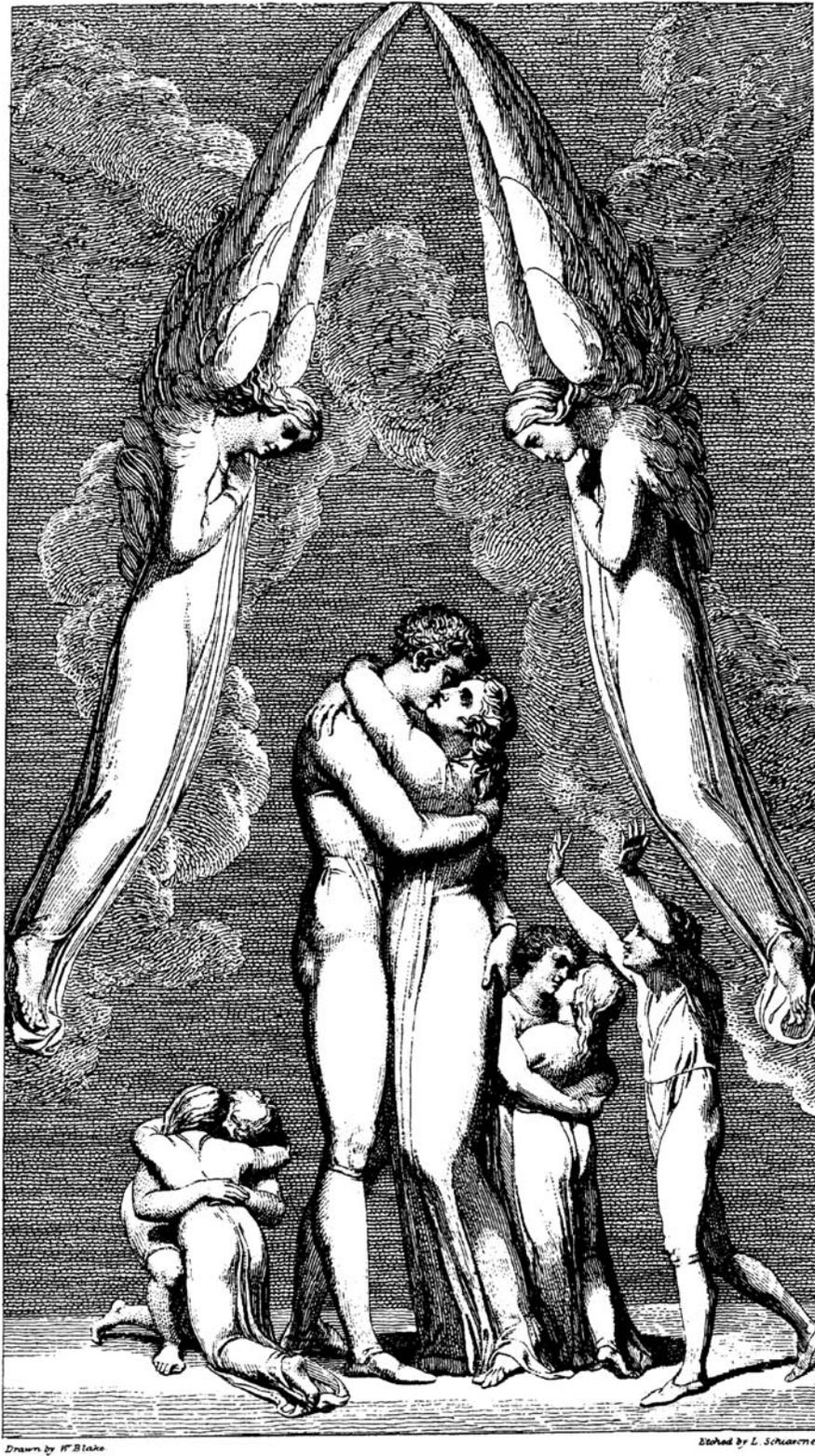
The Romantic movement also had a profound influence on the attitudes toward death and the afterlife. Romanticism began to develop in the late eighteenth century and had a major influence in the arts during the early nineteenth century. The principal elements of the Romantic philosophy included profound reverence for nature, an emphasis on feelings and emotions, and a keen interest in anything ancient, mysterious, or exotic. Aside from literature and the visual arts, the Romantic movement had a major influence on mortuary behavior and attitudes toward death and the afterlife. The increased importance given to death during the nineteenth century has been recognized and described as the Cult of the Dead and the Beautification of Death movement. First, there was an increased amount of sentimentalization surrounding death and the afterlife. The death of a relative or a loved one became a profoundly emotional experience, and one that was prolonged through more lengthy and elaborate mourning behaviors. The afterlife became idealized in literature and the visual arts as well as popular culture (Ariès, 1974; Bell, 1990; Farrell, 1980; Stannard, 1977, 1980). These attitudinal trends were clearly expressed in material culture, especially through more and more elaborate monuments and coffins, and thus they are often interpreted as an element of consumer behavior or a display of wealth and status. Tarlow (1999a, 1999b), however, argues that it is more appropriate to understand these trends as reflections of the emotional connections between the living and the deceased.

Both in poetry and painting, the English poet and artist William Blake provided some of the most explicit imagery pertaining to death and the afterlife during the late eighteenth to early nineteenth century. Although Blake’s vision was anything but conventional, and his work was not widely popular during his lifetime, his work does reflect the changing ideas and attitudes toward death that were expressed by the Romantic movement. Blake’s illustrations for Robert Blair’s poem *The Grave*, published in 1808, graphically portray Romantic notions of death and the afterlife (Blair, 1808). *The Day of Judgment* employs an overall composition that displays remarkable similarity to

illustrations of the Last Judgment that date to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, attesting to the longevity of images and visual symbols in a culture’s collective consciousness. Another illustration for *The Grave*, entitled *The Meeting of a Family in Heaven* (Fig. 1), clearly portrays the afterlife as a place where one is reunited with those with whom one shared life in the natural world. This is an important difference from the medieval view, wherein the afterlife culminated by a reunion with Christ. But in *Death’s Door* (Fig. 2), Blake explicitly used the iconography of death as an entryway or passageway to another world that was commonly seen in religious art, especially in representations of Christ’s descent into Limbo.

Along with Romanticism, a new literary genre, consolation literature, became an important element of popular American middle-class culture in the mid-nineteenth century. Much of the consolation literature focused on deathbed scenes and detailed descriptions of the afterlife, portrayed in the most mundane detail. By sentimentalizing death and the afterlife, this literary genre encouraged prolonged periods of mourning, elaborate funerary practices, and conspicuous memorials to the dead, all of which defined the Beautification of Death movement. In the consolation literature, which to a large degree reflected the popular tastes and ideals, Heaven was portrayed not as the Kingdom of God, but as a domestic paradise where loved ones were reunited after being separated by death (Ariès, 1985; Douglas, 1975; see Fig. 1). The portrayal of the afterlife as a place to meet friends and family was not limited to popular literature; it was also expressed in the inscriptions on cemetery monuments (Tarlow, 1999a, 1999b).

With the spread of the rural cemetery movement, nineteenth-century developments in mortuary behavior were also expressed in landscapes. The rural cemetery movement was marked by the creation of expansive, elaborately landscaped burial places, which appeared more as public parks designed to provide opportunities for leisure, contemplation, and edification for the living. In North America, the beginning of the rural cemetery movement was marked by the creation of Boston’s Mount Auburn Cemetery in 1831, and it quickly spread to other major urban centers of the northeast. The new rural cemeteries were typically



**Fig. 1** William Blake's illustration *The Meeting of a Family in Heaven* (from *The Grave*, a Poem by Robert Blair [1808])



**Fig. 2** William Blake's illustration *Death's Door* (from *The Grave, a Poem* by Robert Blair [1808])

founded by private groups or municipal agencies, which was an important departure from the traditional pattern wherein the care of the dead was left to the church (French, 1975). Mount Auburn Cemetery was founded by a private group who joined with the Massachusetts Horticultural Society to acquire a 72-acre tract along the Charles River (French, 1975).

The spread of the rural cemetery movement stemmed from a number of historical developments, not the least of which was general public concern with health and sanitation in developing urban areas, stimulated in part by the yellow fever epidemics that occurred in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Throughout the Colonial period in the northeast, cemeteries had been sited in the center of towns; yet they were typically neglected places, and they became increasingly viewed as unhealthy places.

An important element of the rural cemetery was a plan that included carriageways, footpaths, and individual family plots that could be fenced. Mount Auburn required the use of stone grave markers, except that slate, a traditional material for grave-stones, was prohibited. Security staff was also hired to protect the cemetery property from the unauthorized exhuming of corpses for anatomical study (French, 1975; Sloan, 1991). A major inspiration for the rural cemetery movement in America was the opening of the Cemetery of Père LaChaise in Paris in 1804. Père LaChaise was the first municipal cemetery to be designed as a picturesque landscape garden, and it quickly became a favored burial place for the Parisian elite. The founding of Père LaChaise was largely a response to the overcrowding of the existing churchyard cemeteries that had led to dangerously unhealthful conditions. Scientific discoveries in the 1770s led to a new awareness of the mechanisms by which diseases were transmitted. Many urban cemeteries had become so overcrowded with rotting corpses that they became recognized as public nuisances, providing impetus for the creation of new burial places outside the rapidly developing urban centers. The new rural cemeteries were sited outside of existing urban centers, but at the same time they assumed a greater role in civic life. Designed as "fields of rest," the rural cemeteries incorporated new ideals of the

landscape garden, offering panoramic views, fresh air, sunshine, and intimate spaces where one could rest and contemplate nature and commemorative monuments that expressed society's highest ideals (Etlin, 1984).

After the establishment of Mount Auburn in 1831, Laurel Hill was established in Philadelphia in 1836, followed by Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn, New York, in 1838. Both were designed on the Mount Auburn model, with large tracts overlooking a body of water. The movement spread quickly to other American sites in the Northeast and Midwest. The Père LaChaise model achieved its greatest popularity in Philadelphia, where nearly 20 new rural cemeteries had been established by 1849. The new rural cemeteries became so popular that they shaped the emerging ideals of urban design by providing an impetus for the creation of large urban park systems. Andrew Jackson Downing, America's first important landscape designer who popularized the rural Picturesque style of domestic architecture, was profoundly influenced by the ideals expressed in the garden cemeteries (Etlin, 1984; French, 1975; Whiffen and Koeper, 1981).

At the same time the new rural cemeteries were becoming popular in America, garden cemeteries were also being established in Western Europe. In Great Britain, the Père LaChaise model was emulated in Liverpool's Low Hill General Cemetery, established in 1825, followed by the spectacular Necropolis in Glasgow, laid out in 1833. In London, the first important garden cemeteries were the All Souls Cemetery at Kensal Green, established in 1833, and the Abney Park Cemetery, established in 1840 (Etlin, 1984; French, 1975).

The Romantic fascination with natural landscapes suffused with ancient and exotic elements was directly expressed in the rural cemetery movement. Egyptian obelisks, gates, and other symbols of death were among the most common statuary subjects. Some of the new rural cemeteries eventually became so densely crowded with memorials that they appeared as statuary gardens, which was an important impetus to the development of American sculpture. The new cemeteries, both geographically and philosophically removed from their previous sites in densely crowded urban areas, typically offered a carefully landscaped, naturalistic settings

that were sought out and enjoyed by the public (Bell, 1990; French, 1975; Sloan, 1991). In Britain, the adoption of Egyptian obelisks and iconography associated with death, along with the importing of nonlocal granite and marble, represented an unusual reversal of influence from the colony to the state (Mytum, 2003).

## The Archaeology of Historical-Period Cemeteries

There is a vast literature, much of it available in the “gray literature,” on the archaeology of historical-period cemeteries. Some of the pioneering studies in historical archaeology have focused on mortuary behavior, and these studies have included both aboveground studies of gravestones as well as actual excavations of cemeteries. Deetz and Dethlefsen’s (1971) examination of stylistic change in New England gravestones firmly established mortuary behavior as an important avenue of inquiry in historical archaeology and demonstrated the complexity of the issue. Much of the archaeological work done in the United States in the past several decades has been undertaken in the context of compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, enacted in 1966, but subsequently amended. But beyond the federal, state, county, and other jurisdictional regulations and ordinances that govern the treatment of historic properties, archaeologists are now being called on more frequently to perform disinterments, a duty that was formerly handled by undertakers. Publication has not kept pace with the number of cemetery excavations, but they have contributed a wealth of basic descriptive information regarding the archaeology of historical-period cemeteries, including siting factors, coffin styles, osteological data, and regional and ethnic differences. While many of these studies have been indexed in Bell’s bibliographic survey of historical-period cemeteries, much new information has become available since it was published in 1994.

There have also been important theoretical advances in the past two decades. Much of the research conducted in the 1970s and 1980s was influenced to some degree by the processual approach espoused by the new archaeology.

Perhaps the most influential collection of papers and theoretical statements pertaining to mortuary behavior done under this paradigm is Brown’s (1971) edited volume *Approaches to the Social Dimensions of Mortuary Practices*, published in the Society for American Archaeology’s Memoir series. As many researchers have pointed out, however, the models and theoretical frameworks put forth in Brown’s volume were derived primarily from pre-industrial societies, specifically the assumption that social rank or status is directly expressed in mortuary ritual (the “Binford-Saxe approach”; Binford, 1971; Saxe, 1971). These models, as many adherents of the postprocessualist, structuralist, and symbolic schools have pointed out, are not wholly relevant for the study of industrialized, capitalist societies. Indeed, historical archaeology in general and the archaeology of historical-period cemeteries in particular have both benefited from and contributed significantly to the recently emerging schools of thought in other archaeologies and disciplines (see Chapman, 2003).

The cliché that cemeteries have more to say about the living who create them than the dead who are buried in them obscures the theoretical complexity of approaches to mortuary behavior. The assumption that higher levels of expenditure on mortuary display and grave goods are afforded to individuals of high status has been challenged most effectively by archaeologists who believe that mortuary ceremonialism must be viewed in terms of its ideological expression of the sociopolitical system. Hodder, who has stated this postprocessualist position most effectively, argues that material culture has an important symbolic content and that this content provides an important instrument for the expression of power relations between diverse individuals and groups within a world system (Hodder 1982, 1985).

As the postprocessualists point out, it cannot be assumed that the power relationships inherent in the hierarchical social structure of capitalist society are *directly* expressed in mortuary ritual. Hodder argues that the inequalities of a hierarchical sociopolitical system may be expressed in mortuary ceremonialism either by (1) a naturalizing ideology, wherein the inequalities of access to wealth and power are represented as an inherent characteristic of nature, or (2) a masking ideology, wherein the

inequalities within a hierarchical system are denied or obscured through ritual or through a uniformity of material culture (Hodder, 1982, 1985). This argument expresses one of the fundamental tenets of postprocessualism and symbolic archaeology—that the meaning of objects is not inherent, but derived from association and use in different social contexts, and that individuals and groups with different values, expectations, and access to power actively reinterpret and renegotiate their roles, providing impetus for historical change.

Brenner's (1988) study of the burial ceremonialism of southern New England Native American groups illustrates the important theoretical insights of the symbolic and postprocessualist schools. Colonial expansion had produced a high level of political and cultural instability among Native American groups during this period, and Brenner was able to document significant changes in burial ceremonialism through analysis of a large sample of mortuary sites dating from the late prehistoric period through the seventeenth century. Noting that trade goods—particularly brightly colored clothing, beads, and nonutilitarian brass and copper objects—were often given a symbolic importance and used to mark political power within Native American groups, Brenner (1988) raised the issue of why such goods were disposed of at death when they could have been retained and used as a claim to status by the next generation. During the period under analysis, the Native American cultures evolved from egalitarian bands with mobile membership to more highly ranked groups that were able to form alliances and act in concert with regard to Colonial groups. Brenner observed that burial ceremonialism became intensified during this period, and concluded that the more prominent use of trade goods assumed an increasingly important role in representing political and social relations. In a historical setting where power relationships were becoming increasingly important, the use of highly valued trade goods in funerary contexts was a marking strategy, where political and social roles were clearly and overtly expressed.

Site 7S-F-68, a small family cemetery in rural Sussex County, Delaware, provides a good example of the traditional American Colonial mortuary practices (LeeDecker et al., 1995). Site 7S-F-68 was a small burial plot that contained a total of

nine individuals, most likely interred during the period from 1752 to 1799. Mortuary behavior, as determined from siting of the burial plots, treatment of the deceased, and coffin styles showed a strong continuity with traditions that had their antecedents in Europe. The rural areas of the Middle Atlantic colonies exhibited a dispersed settlement pattern and the use of small family burial plots was a common practice. Located on a slight ridge of well-drained soil surrounded by an expanse of low-lying topography, the Site 7S-F-68 cemetery conforms to a general locational model that applied in the surrounding region and throughout the Middle Atlantic colonies (Stilgoe, 1978, 1982). In rural Delaware, the use of small family burial plots persisted until the mid-nineteenth century, and these small burial plots were typically located on high ground within a broad semicircle to the rear of the farmhouse and away from the principal road upon which the farmstead was sited (Bachman and Catts, 1990).

No evidence of grave markers of any kind was found at the Site 7S-F-68 cemetery, although it is possible that such markers may have been removed when the area was cultivated during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Given the scarcity of stone in the Coastal Plain region surrounding the site, it is most likely that burial markers would have been made of wood. Shroud pins or evidence of their use was obtained from six of the nine burials, and only one of the burials, an adult male, contained any evidence of clothing, that being eight copper buttons that may have belonged to a jacket. All interments were laid out according to the traditional alignment of the body, with the head to the west and the feet to the east. Two clusters of interments were apparently kin groupings, and a few appeared to represent isolated individuals unrelated to the primary kin groupings (LeeDecker et al., 1995).

The findings of the Binghamton Gravestone Project (McGuire, 1988) provide another example of the interplay between ideology and mortuary behavior. McGuire studied 27 cemeteries located in Broome County, New York, that were used during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Data were collected from more than 2,000 gravestones, together with information from city directories, census records, and obituaries. For most of the

sample, information was available pertaining to the deceased's ethnic affiliation, residential location at the time of death, and occupation, as well as the deceased's relationship to adjacent interments.

McGuire observed that community graveyards or churchyard cemeteries were typical for Broome County through the early nineteenth century. The rural cemetery movement, which began to spread through the Northeast in the nineteenth century, did not manifest in Broome County. Instead, a new type of burial place, described as a lawn-park cemetery, appeared in the 1860s. This lawn-park cemetery, which continued as the model in Broome County through the 1930s, incorporated some features of the typical rural cemetery, such as ostentatious monuments and family-owned plots, but it did not attempt to recreate a natural landscape. Much more elaborate gravestones became the norm during the late nineteenth century, along with larger, more ornate family mausoleums. In this period, a direct relationship between mortuary investment and status was clear. Construction of expensive family mausoleums peaked during the 1920s and 1930s, a period when a general reorientation of mortuary behavior began to occur. Among these changes were a shift to less-elaborate monuments, replacement of the family plot or mausoleum by small plots for married couples, and an increase in cremation, rather than casket burial.

McGuire concluded that the Broome County cemeteries were landscapes intentionally created to display certain elements of culture and ideology. The simple churchyard and community burial grounds of the early nineteenth century expressed an ideology of egalitarianism, in effect denying or masking the existence of social inequalities that were undeniably present in the developing capitalist society of the day. By the late nineteenth century, this egalitarianism was replaced by a philosophy that glorified individual achievement and success, which was directly expressed in the elaborate burial monuments and family mausoleums that filled the lawn-park cemeteries. McGuire observed that significant changes in the capitalist economy occurred in parallel with the changing cemetery landscapes, particularly the rapid growth of industrialism in the late nineteenth century and the labor unrest and rise of unions in the early twentieth century. He concluded, however, that mortuary behavior could not

be linked directly to changes in the capitalist economy, but rather to more generalized social attitudes and cultural patterns (McGuire, 1988).

Excavation of the Weir family cemetery in Manassas, Virginia, provides another example of how mortuary behavior may reflect complex cultural and historical processes that use material culture to express ideology and status (Little et al., 1992). At this site, archaeological excavation provided information not only on coffin styles, burial monuments, and methods of interment, but also allowed osteological analysis to assess health conditions, as determined from nutrition and dental care. The Weir family cemetery was used between the 1830s and 1907, and the date of interment was known for nearly all of the 24 interments. Historical sources established that the Weirs were a wealthy plantation family, and the osteological analysis indicated better dental care and nutrition in comparison to other contemporary populations. Four distinct periods of use were determined from analysis of the material culture: 1830s–1842, 1852–1862, 1867–1870, and 1886–1907. Interments from the first period were characterized by relatively plain coffins in the traditional hexagonal style. Coffin decoration increased during the second period, peaking in the years immediately after the American Civil War. The trend toward increasingly elaborate coffin styles was linked to the Beautification of Death movement, which reached its peak expression in the 1860s and 1870s. The final period of cemetery use was characterized by a reversal in the trend toward elaborate grave decoration, although the historical records indicated that the Weir family maintained their high status through this period.

According to Little and her colleagues, the shift away from elaborate mortuary display that occurred at the Weir family cemetery in the late nineteenth century embodies the cyclical quality of status display, wherein the elites "change the rules" after emulation by nonelite groups reaches a certain point. A pattern of elite innovation and nonelite emulation is operative through the entire cycle of elaboration. After a period of increasingly elaborate display, the point of saturation is reached, and the competition from nonelite groups became untenable. At this point, understatement became the preferred expression of elite status (Little et al., 1992).

Competitive emulation of elite behavior is one of the major themes that archaeologists invoke to explain historical changes in consumer behavior, including elements of mortuary behavior, particularly the use of more and more elaborate monuments and caskets. Cannon (2005) has examined this process from a feminist perspective and presented convincing arguments that women have been important agents of historical change in a variety of cultural contexts. Elaborating a linguistic model that showed a tendency for women to lead men in the adoption of new, prestigious variants of language, Cannon identified the same class-based process whereby emulation of the elite led to increasingly ostentatious monuments, eventually reaching the point of saturation in the late nineteenth century. Based on analysis of monuments from 50 villages in southern Cambridgeshire, England, she was able to determine from the gravestone inscriptions whether the selection of the monument was made by a man or a woman, and thereby conclude that women were ahead of men with regard to the changing fashions of monument style. The detailed records available to Cannon for Victorian England clearly demonstrated the importance of individual agency in effecting cultural change, and she argues that women played a similar role in other cultural contexts, including the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Seneca of New York, early seventh-century Anglo-Saxon England, and Early Bronze Age central Europe and Denmark.

Excavation of the Uxbridge Almshouse Burial Ground (Bell, 1990) provides an additional example of the competitive emulation model in nineteenth-century mortuary contexts. The Uxbridge Almshouse Burial Ground was a paupers' cemetery located in southeastern Massachusetts, where excavations removed a total of 31 nineteenth-century interments. The cemetery was used only for burial of individuals of the lowest social and economic classes, and some of the grave markers were nothing more than rough fieldstone slabs or granite quarry spalls. The discovery of decorative coffin hardware, one of the expressions of the Beautification of Death movement, was initially viewed as an anomaly in the context of a paupers' cemetery. However, the frequent association of decorative coffin hardware with pauper burials forced a reexamination of the assumption that elaborate coffin hardware was

used to mark high-status interments. Decorative casket handles, nameplates, escutcheons, and tacks were used in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries exclusively on the most expensive burial containers, which were generally available only to the elites. However, by the late nineteenth century, technological advances in metal casting and mass production made these items widely available. Bell observed that decorative coffin hardware has been widely reported from late nineteenth-century sites throughout North America, and its use at Uxbridge Almshouse demonstrates how material culture that was available only to the elite ultimately became available to consumers of virtually all socioeconomic levels. Bell's research at the Uxbridge Almshouse supports the competitive emulation model and demonstrates that the trappings of the Beautification of Death movement had reached a socially marginal group in the late nineteenth century. As such, it also illustrates the fallacy of attempting to interpret socioeconomic status from a narrow class of material culture (Bell, 1990).

Parker Pearson (1982) used an ethnological approach to characterize English mortuary behavior of the modern period, wherein archaeological data are entirely lacking, relative to the Victorian period, when the Beautification of Death movement reached the height of its expression. Parker Pearson's theoretical position was grounded in the post-processual school, and he argued that mortuary ritual communication serves to "naturalize" and legitimate the hierarchical social order, which otherwise would be unstable. Parker Pearson's study focused on Cambridge, England, and he was able to obtain data for 277 deceased individuals out of a total of 3,000 who had died in 1977. The data showed no correlation between the social standing of the deceased and the cost of the funeral, a fact that was confirmed by interviews with a number of informant undertakers. The data did reveal some distinctive mortuary practices associated with Catholics and with certain ethnic groups (Polish, Irish, and Italian) as well as gypsies and showmen.

Tracing the development of English mortuary practices through historical sources, Parker Pearson (1982) observed that while overt self-advertisement and status display peaked during the Victorian period, a number of important trends that became dominant in the twentieth century actually

originated at this time. Overall, twentieth-century mortuary behavior was marked by a decline in overt status display, which is perhaps best exemplified by the increasing popularity of cremation. In the modern period, elaborate funerals and monuments are no longer considered tasteful by the elite. Material culture has retained an important role in status display; however, this is no longer accomplished through mortuary ritual, but through other venues such as residences, automobiles, foods, personal possessions, and clothing. The campaign for cremation in Britain began in the 1870s, as an effort to reduce the expense of funerals and to introduce a hygienic method for disposal of the dead. The practice of cremation goes against the traditional Christian doctrine of the Resurrection, and Parker Pearson views the modern popularity of cremation as evidence of replacement of religion as an agency of social control by the new agencies of science and rationalism.

Historical and archaeological investigations at the Newton Plantation provided an important body of data pertaining to slave life from the mid-seventeenth century through the early nineteenth century (Handler and Lange, 1978). Newton Plantation is located on the southeastern Caribbean island of Barbados, and the investigation included archaeological excavation of a slave cemetery and historical and ethnographic research. The cemetery was unmarked and unknown except to a few elderly informants, and it ultimately yielded a total of 92 interments. Dating of the burials was tenuous; nonetheless, general periods of interment were established from stratigraphic evidence and from a few tobacco pipes, ceramics, and other datable artifacts. The excavations did provide extensive descriptive information regarding slave burial practices, including coffins, coffin hardware, clothing, orientation of the corpses, grave goods (beads and bracelets), and distinctive methods of treatment of the dead. Skeletal material was very poorly preserved, but sufficient to identify a distinctive pattern of dental alteration (filing of incisors) that was assumed to be associated with the original slave population.

Many of the mortuary patterns observed at the Newton Plantation slave cemetery were similar to those of traditional Christian practice, specifically the east–west orientation of the interments.

However, a number of traits associated with a distinctive African mortuary complex were also identified, primarily through ethnographic research. Handler and Lange argued that mortuary behavior was an important element of slave culture, which itself comprises a broad ideological and behavioral system. The greatest frequency of African traits was observed for the earlier period of the cemetery's use, when it was assumed that the interments included a high proportion of African-born individuals representing a very diverse gene pool. The later period of cemetery use exhibited more European influences, when the interments would have been Creoles (Handler and Lange, 1978).

The First African Baptist Church in Philadelphia cemetery in Philadelphia embodies another example of the survival of non-Christian, African American mortuary practices, but in a nineteenth-century urban context (Parrington et al., 1989). This cemetery was used from ca. 1823 to 1842, after which it was virtually forgotten until its unexpected discovery during construction of a railway tunnel. The site yielded a total of 140 burials representing an urban African American population. Although a number of the burials had been disturbed, the skeletal material was sufficiently well preserved to allow analysis of the population's demography and health. The mortuary patterns exhibited a number of similarities with traditional Christian practices, particularly the alignment of the interments with heads to the west. Coffin preservation was fair, and nearly all identifiable examples exhibited the traditional hexagonal shape, with both flat-lidded and gable-lidded styles. A number of distinctive African mortuary practices were evident, such as the placement of a single coin near the head, the placement of a ceramic plate over the stomach, and the placement of a single shoe in the coffin. While most of the individuals were interred in a supine position, at least one had been placed in a semi-prone position, which showed a possible linkage to folk beliefs concerning the supernatural (Parrington et al., 1989).

Analysis of eighteenth-century Narragansett, Rhode Island, plantation burial grounds reveals another example of how mortuary behavior is used to perpetuate in death a pattern of ethnic segregation that began during life. Noting that spatial segregation was an important element of the relationship between slaves and their masters, Fitts

(1996) has drawn attention to the ways in which slaves' status was marked by mortuary ritual. Most eighteenth-century plantations and home-stead farms in southeastern Rhode Island had small family burial plots where members of the white families were buried together with their slaves, although spatially distinct areas were maintained for the white families and slaves. Slaves were commonly buried outside the primary burial area that was delineated by walls, fences, or hedges, and their inferior status was marked by the style of burial marker, which was generally a simple, unadorned tombstone (Fitts, 1996).

Jewish cemeteries in American midwestern cities also demonstrate the importance of ethnic factors in mortuary behavior. Using an ethnoarchaeological investigative approach, Gradwohl examined cemeteries associated with various Conservative, Orthodox, and Reform Jewish groups in Louisville, Kentucky, and Lincoln, Nebraska. These cemeteries dated to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and they expressed some of the features that characterized general American mortuary behavior during this period, such as the rural landscape design for the cemetery as a whole, the erection of large family monuments, and the use of family mausoleums. The appearance of mausoleums was one of the more anomalous features that would appear in a Jewish cemetery, as Jewish custom dictates that the deceased be buried; mausoleums, however, did not appear in the cemeteries used by Orthodox Jewish groups.

The use of a separate burial area was one of the means by which Jewish groups marked their ethnic identity, and the cemetery's physical separation was most clearly marked for burial places used by Orthodox groups. There were other important differences among the subdenominational burial areas. While the gravestone styles used in all Jewish cemeteries were comparable to those in the broader American society, there were differences in the use of explicitly Jewish symbols and in the languages used for inscriptions. Jewish symbols such as the Star of David, the Torah, and the menorah were common in Conservative and Orthodox Jewish cemeteries, as were inscriptions written in Hebrew, Yiddish, and German, but these features rarely appeared in the cemeteries used by Reformed Jewish groups. The cemeteries expressed the unique

historical origins and distinct patterns of ritual and theology associated with the subdenominational groups, and thereby served as a marker of ethnic affiliation (Gradwohl, 1993; Gradwohl and Gradwohl, 1988).

Jordan's (1993) study of Texas graveyards illustrates a number of important points about ethnic and regional diversity. This study provides a wealth of detail about burial practices associated with different ethnic groups, including Hispanic, German, and traditional Southern culture, which reflects influences from southern Appalachian, southern Anglo-American, African American, and Native American cultures. Focusing on the cemeteries of east Texas, Jordan has documented a number of distinctive behaviors seen in the cemeteries used by the various ethnic groups who began to populate this region in the nineteenth century. These include maintenance of the graves by periodically scraping and mounding soil onto the grave; decoration of graves with distinctive artifacts such as shells, light bulbs, and shrines; the use of distinctive types of grave markers; and various patterns for spatial arrangement of the interments. One of Jordan's most important observations is the persistence and continuity of ethnic folkways in mortuary contexts, particularly in rural areas, long after the assimilation of these subgroups into a dominant national culture.

## Conclusions

A number of phenomena associated with mortuary behavior became manifest in the nineteenth century during the Beautification of Death movement. New attitudes and cultural norms were expressed in a number of important ways. Earlier, traditional methods for treatment of the dead—burial of the corpse in a simple cloth shroud and a plain hexagonal wooden coffin—were replaced by much more elaborate funerary practices. By the end of the nineteenth century, it was common to bury the dead in their best clothing, and the traditional hexagonal coffins were replaced by much more elaborately constructed and decorated vessels that were designed to preserve the physical remains of the deceased as long as possible. New, elaborately

landscaped burial grounds, often built with private or municipal sponsorship, gained in popularity at the expense of crowded urban churchyards and rural family burial plots. The rural cemetery movement, which began in the major urban centers of Western Europe and northeastern North America, featured the creation of new landscapes that embodied a romanticized ideal of the natural landscape and served as a setting for elaborate monuments that announced the achievements and material success of anyone who could afford them. Even for the most marginal and dispossessed strata of society, the notion of a proper burial was colored by the ideals expressed in the Beautification of Death movement (but compare the findings of Bromberg and Shephard [2006] at the Quaker Burying Ground in Alexandria, Virginia, where the evidence suggested an apparent refusal by that religious group to participate in the conspicuous consumption of the mainstream culture). At the same time that these monuments and landscapes became a form of conspicuous consumption, they also reflected a shift in the nature of the emotional bonds between the living and the dead.

As an important facet of a culture's worldview, mortuary behavior and the attendant material culture are specific as to time and place, and vary according to regional and ethnic factors, changing notions of taste and fashion, religious traditions, and folkways that have persisted for centuries and millennia. Individual choices made within that context may also vary significantly according to gender. With the ability to draw from a wealth of texts and material culture, historical archaeologists have made some of the most important theoretical contributions to the study of mortuary behavior. It is impossible to understand the changes in mortuary behavior that accompanied the expansion of urbanism, industrialism, and consumerism without appealing to the post-processual notions of how material culture is actively used in a symbolic sense as a means for individuals and groups to actively negotiate their social position.

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