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**Death Became Them:
The Defeminization of the American Death Culture, 1609-1899**

by

Briony D. Zlomke

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

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Death Becomes Them: The Defeminization of the American Death Culture

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University of Nebraska, 2013

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Focusing specifically on the years 1609 to 1899 in the United States, this thesis examines how middle-class women initially controlled the economy of preparing the dead in pre-industrialized America and lost their positions as death transitioned from a community-based event to an occurrence from which one could profit. In this new economy, men dominated the capitalist-driven funeral parlors and undertaker services. The changing ideology about white middle-class women's proper places in society and the displacement of women in the "death trade" with the advent of the funeral director exacerbated this decline of a once female-defined practice. These changes dramatically altered women's positions within death culture. As women no longer participated directly in the death economy, they became active in shaping public mourning rituals and policing mourning etiquette and fashion. Coinciding with larger shifts in American society, specifically the professionalization of once laymen pursuits, industrialization, and urbanization, these changes reveal that with each transition, women's culture or 'way of life' was altered, and accordingly, so was the culture of death.

DEDICATION

For Shawn,

*Who not only endured many sleepless nights with me, but also held me when the moments
felt impossible.*

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INTRODUCTION

“I would not let her be taken to the undertaker’s, but did all things for her myself.”¹

On February 22, 1800, thirteen women clad in white dresses, black beaver hats, and black cloaks with white scarves, helped lead a funeral commemoration procession for George Washington in Hallowell, Maine. Escorting this somber parade to memorialize the fallen president of the New Republic, these women held a place of esteemed honor. Each represented one of the original thirteen colonies. They understood that their part in President Washington’s funeral procession was a significant honor.² The participation of these women in this parade was consistent with decades of women’s active and visible involvement within American colonial death culture. This culture would expand in the New Republic to include taking care of the dying, controlling the economics of death, and ritualizing mourning, funeral, and burial practices. For most of the nineteenth century, women defined and controlled American death and mourning culture as a distinctly gendered enterprise.

Before the late 1800s in the United States, it was almost unthinkable for a man to prepare a body for burial. As death primarily occurred in the home, preparations surrounding the body were designated as a female duty. Viewed as an extension of birthing children and nursing the ailing, the responsibility of preparing the dead fell upon women. Although men may have assisted with preparing the corpse, they primarily

¹ Anne Ellis, *The Life of an Ordinary Women* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 1999), 265, Google Books, <http://books.google.com/books?id=4cP2xwr7DKIC&printsec> (accessed August 7, 2012).

² Charles Elevanton Nash and Martha Ballard, *The History of Augusta: First Settlements and Early Days as a Town Including The Diary of Mrs. Martha Moore Ballard (1785 to 1812)* (Augusta, Maine: Charles E. Nash & Son, 1904), 202-204. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwives Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary 1785-1812* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 32. There is a discrepancy between Laurel Thatcher’s section and Charles Nash’s section about this parade. Thatcher quotes sixteen women while Nash lists only thirteen women.

handled external affairs surrounding the funeral. Their duties and obligations focused on ordering or constructing the coffin, transporting the body to the burial site, and digging the grave.³

By the 1830s, however, undertakers slowly began to monopolize the death culture and funeral practices by opening their own funerary businesses. The emergence of the male undertaker inaugurated the defeminization of death practices, ousting women from this field. This male monopoly of the “death business” continued with the professionalization of the funeral director. From preparing the body to overseeing the deceased’s placement in the grave, the funeral director controlled and directed all aspects of funerary practices. Sidney George Fisher, a Philadelphia diarist and writer, reflected on these changes. In January 1837, Fisher attended a private funeral and recorded his observations of the event. In his diary he mentioned that no women attended the funeral. In May 1848, he remarked of another funeral that “no invitations were sent but the presence of Henry’s most intimate friends, male friends, was [sic] expected” to attend.⁴ No longer leading funeral parades by the 1830s, women found themselves excluded from private funerals and burials of men, and assumed roles as spectators at many funerals.⁵

Focusing specifically on the years 1609 to 1899 in the United States, this thesis will examine how middle-class women initially controlled the economy of preparing the dead in pre-industrialized America and lost their positions as death transitioned from a

³ Georganne Rundblad, “From “Shrouding Woman” to Lady Assistant: An Analysis of Occupational Sex-Typing in the Funeral Industry, 1870’s to 1920’s” (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1993), 69.

⁴ Gary Laderman, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799-1883* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996), 43-44.

⁵ There has been some documentation of all-female attended funerals. In February 1819, John Morrison Duncan witnessed a funeral in Baltimore, Maryland of an infant. Attended only by woman and the infant’s father, the funeral did not involve any other male participants. John M. Duncan, *Travels Through Part of the United States and Canada 1818 and 1819* (New York: W. Gilley, 1823), 314.

community-based event to an occurrence from which one could profit. In this new economy, men dominated the capitalist-driven funeral parlors and undertaker services. The changing ideology about white middle-class women's proper places in society and the displacement of women in the "death trade" with the advent of the funeral director exacerbated this decline of a once female-defined practice.⁶ These changes dramatically altered women's positions within death culture. As women no longer participated directly in the death economy, they became active in shaping public mourning rituals and policing mourning etiquette and fashion. These changes coincided with larger shifts in American society, including the professionalization of once laymen pursuits, industrialization, and urbanization.⁷

In 1834, Theodore Dwight released his travelogue, *Things As They Are: Or, Notes of a Traveller Through Some of the Middle and Northern States*. Commenting on the changing landscapes of cemeteries and graveyards, Dwight proclaimed, "Cemeteries should be planned with reference to the living as well as the dead."⁸ Today most historians of death approach their studies with this ideology in mind. To understand the ways of the living, one must examine burial processes and funerary customs. Almost every aspect of death culture allows an insight into how communities transitioned over

⁶ While this thesis focuses specifically on white middle-class women's experience, these are books that offer alternative perspectives on different cultures and classes in the United States. Sue Fawn Chung and Priscilla Wegars, *Chinese American Death Rituals: Respecting the Ancestors* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2005); Eric R. Seeman, *Death in the New World: Cross-Cultural Encounters, 1492-1800* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

Suzanne E. Smith, *To Serve the Living: Funeral Directors and the African American Way of Death* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010); Lynne P. Sullivan, and Robert C. Mainfort, *Mississippian Mortuary Practices: Beyond Hierarchy and the Representationist Perspective* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010);

⁷ Stuart M. Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 13.

⁸ Theodore Dwight, *Things As They Are: Or, Notes of a Traveller Through Some of the Middle and Northern States* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1834), 162, Google Books, <http://books.google.com/books?id=uMDVtc3w5kgC> (accessed July 29, 2012).

decades and even centuries. Gary Laderman, author of *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799-1883*, outlines how death research provides a deeper insight into communal attitudes. “How the dead body is cared for, and the practices employed for its disposal, can tell us as much about the animating principles within a given society as about how that society understands the meaning of death.”⁹ This study takes its cue from Laderman.

Notable death historians generally agree on two major movements that altered nineteenth century death culture.¹⁰ The first movement began in the middle of the eighteenth century and continued until the middle of the nineteenth century. During this period, Americans began the process of sentimentalizing death. Before the 1830s Americans viewed death as a practical affair in the life cycle. Death was to be feared and revered as a sign of God’s will and testimony and not to be questioned. As society began to expand intellectually, socially, and religiously, death began to be viewed as a benevolent experience that no longer evoked fear but rather suggested an eternal sleep.¹¹ Throughout this period, the benevolent viewpoint of death expanded across the United States.¹²

⁹ Laderman, *The Sacred Remains*, 1.

¹⁰ Some historians that embrace this theme are James J. Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death, 1830-1920* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980); Gary Laderman, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799-1883* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996); Michael J. Steiner, *A Study of the Intellectual and Material Culture of Death in Nineteenth-Century America* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2003); Charles O. Jackson, “American Attitudes to Death,” *Journal of American Studies* 11, no. 3 (Dec., 1977): 301, <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.unl.edu/stable/27553308> (accessed May 28, 2012).

¹¹ James J. Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death, 1830-1920* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 5.

¹² Michael J. Steiner, *A Study of the Intellectual and Material Culture of Death in Nineteenth-Century America* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2003), 3.

The second movement began after the Civil War and continued through the late nineteenth century.¹³ This movement focused on the removal of death from the living and their affairs. As these changes in the death culture moved across America, people began to alienate death from everyday life.¹⁴ In 1899, English author Joseph Jacobs referred to this transition as the “Dying of Death.” He proclaimed that death no longer created terror or fear but was commonly seen “as the last and best friend.” “Death [was] being replaced by the joy of life.”¹⁵ To fulfill this ideology, the physical act of death had to be removed from all aspects of life. No longer embracing the finality of mortality, society fashioned the illusion of death as the ‘last slumber’.¹⁶ A beautification campaign of death practices emerged whose goal was to mitigate the rawness of death via material culture, visual culture, and landscape.

As part of this beautification campaign, the “rural” or “garden” cemetery movement began sweeping across the nation in 1831. Replacing simple and ad hoc graveyards, garden cemeteries prided themselves on their spectacular landscapes of winding paths, serene ponds, and lavish plants.¹⁷ Scattered amongst this picturesque scenery are soaring monuments, towering obelisks, glorious mausoleums, and elaborately decorated tombstones. Inspired by the P re Lachaise cemetery in Paris, garden

¹³ See also, Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008) for a specific examination of the death culture and economy during the American Civil War.

¹⁴ Steiner, *A Study of the Intellectual and Material Culture of Death in Nineteenth-Century America*, 3.

¹⁵ Joseph Jacobs, “The Dying Death,” *The Fortnightly Review* 82 (July to December 1899): 264, Google Books,

<https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=GmpIAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&output=reader&authuser=0&hl=en&pg=GBS.PP7> (accessed June 6, 2012).

¹⁶ Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death*, 5.

¹⁷ Richard E. Meyer, ed., *Cemeteries and Gravemarkers: Voices of American Culture* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: U.M.I Research Press, 1989) 293.

cemeteries¹⁸ sought to create a resort for the living, where they could “indulge in the dreams of hope and ambition or solace their hearts by melancholy meditation,” while visiting the dead.¹⁹ Before this movement, graveyards served as a reminder of impending mortality. Epitaphs reinforced this anxiety over death. An elegy for a Mr. Harfield Lyndsey stated,

Our life and time, of which some boast,
Will hasten fast away:
'Tis like the flow'r or shade at most,
That quickly doth decay!!²⁰

People no longer visited cemeteries and graveyards²¹ to be reminded of their mortality, but more as a site of recreational and scenic enjoyment.

Another aspect of this beautification campaign was found in the growing separation of life and death in post-mortem photographs. Before the late 1800s, pictures included the departed but also their parents, siblings, or even the family dog. Death was not to be feared. Photographers did not attempt to mask death or the effects of it. It was common for a family to receive an image of their deceased leaking fluids or in the process of decomposing. By the 1840s, photographers revolutionized their techniques to place the deceased in the most agreeable poses for “slumbering” or “the last sleep.” People no longer desired unrefined post-mortem poses; they wanted their deceased loved ones to have the appearance of an eternal sleep. This attempt to eliminate or disguise

¹⁸ Found in 1831, Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts was the first garden cemetery.

¹⁹ Joseph Story, “Consecration Address,” in *The Picturesque Pocket Companion through Mount Auburn* (Boston: Otis Broaders, and Co., 1839), pp 79. Google Books, <http://books.google.com/books?id=2wE6AQAAIAAJ&printsec> (accessed August 7, 2012).

²⁰ “Elegy on the Death of Mr. Harfield Lyndsey,” in *The Sacred Remains*, 23.

²¹ Though the terms are often used interchangeably, there is a difference between graveyards and cemeteries. Graveyards traditionally are owned by congregations and had a disheveled appearance, as burial plots were not cohesive. Cemeteries tend to be private and non-denominational with a parallelogram layout.

death in images supposedly helped families cope with death. An 1846 advertisement for Southworth & Hawes in Boston proclaimed:

We make miniatures of children and adults instantly, and of Deceased Persons either at our rooms or at private residences. Our arrangements are such that we take miniatures of children and adults instantly, and of DECEASED persons either in our rooms or at private residences. We take great pains to have Miniatures of Deceased Persons agreeable and satisfactory, and they are often so natural as to seem, even to Artists, in a deep sleep.²²

In addition to offering the “the last sleep” pose, photographers created the illusion of life within death. In this option, photographers rendered the deceased as living. Sometimes placed upright in a chair with their eyes open or painted open, the deceased, like a living person, steadily stared back from the photograph. Post-mortem photographs sometimes depicted children playing with a favorite toy or merely sitting amongst their siblings. A skilled artist could even position their subject, so they stood — or they achieved this illusion by flipping an image to 90 degrees. The catalyst behind this evolution of the cemetery and death photography was the advent of the funeral business.²³

As death was removed from the community and the home – the women’s sphere – and placed directly in the hands of a male professional, people veiled death even further. This allowed people’s focus to shift from caring for the corpse to caring for the bereaved; essentially a separation between the dead and the living occurred. No longer did people confront death directly; they avoided it. French Historian Philippe Ariés argued that this elimination of the visual death made it “unnamable.”²⁴ Some historians disagree with this viewpoint. According to Charles O. Jackson this separation between life and death

²² Jay Ruby, *Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1995), 53.

²³ Ruby, *Secure the Shadow*, 89.

²⁴ Philippe Ariés, *Western Attitudes Toward Death from the Middle Ages to the Present*, tran. Patricia M. Ranum (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1974), 106.

preserved death in an eternal slumber allowing the living to extend their presence in a cult-like demeanor, also known as the “Cult of Memory.” No longer embracing mortality, Americans developed an attachment for life. Jackson writes, “In every way possible the dead would not be allowed to truly die. Those alive would draw the dead world into the living world as never before.”²⁵ This, furthermore, allowed the emerging middle-class to express their newfound gentility while partaking in the beautification processes imbedded in American grief culture.²⁶

As middle-class women were eliminated from the death economy, they embraced and projected this new ideology of death. With the fervor of the sentimental death, the act of mourning became the purest expression of human emotions that allowed its participants to lay claim to a new sense of gentility. Proper bereavement etiquette and fashion dictated the new status of women in death culture, which allowed a woman to actively engage in melancholy to express her grief.²⁷ Considered a sign of respect for the dead, women sought the proper attire not only to honor the dead but also to display the newest fashions.²⁸

Taking into account the elaborate mourning fashions, etiquette, and guidelines performed throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century United States, the cultural history of death in American studies is lacking in this sense. The majority of scholarly studies on American death ritual were written between 1950 and 1980. Within the last thirty years there has been a minimalist revival of the study of death; however, new

²⁵ Jackson, “American Attitudes to Death,” *Journal of American Studies* 11, no. 3 (Dec., 1977): 301, <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.unl.edu/stable/27553308> (accessed May 28, 2012).

²⁶ Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1982), 124.

²⁷ Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, 124.

²⁸ Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 149. 152.

scholarship is small in number. In this literature there is a noticeable gap in terms of analysis. Very few authors address gender roles in American death culture. Caring for the dead was a gendered process. The majority of historical research done on this subject focuses on the deep mourning of women but rarely expands its insight to include their original roles in the economy of death.

Literary scholar Ann Douglas is one of the very few historians who studies death through a gender lens. Her article “Heaven Our Home: Consolation Literature in the Northern United States, 1830-1880” (1974), argues that women and their clergy “domesticated heaven” by assuming the authority over death through consolation literature. Although Douglas rightly argues that women controlled consolation literature, her idea that mourning literature offered the marginalized women a voice and recognition in larger society leaves room for argument. Upon further examination, women may have controlled and indulged in consolation literature, but they remained confined to their specific gender boundaries. Consolation literature “incessantly stressed the importance of dying and the dead: it encouraged elaborate funerary practices, conspicuous methods of burial and commemoration, and microscopic viewings of a much inflated afterlife.”²⁹ Perpetrating the expected etiquette and guidelines of the nineteenth century woman mourner, women continued to perform and grieve within their designated sphere. This thesis will push the boundaries initially set by Douglas (who emphasizes a sentimental sphere for women) by examining women’s active and economic role within the death culture and their subsequent removal from it. While emphasizing a gender analysis, this

²⁹ Ann Douglas, “Heaven Our Home: Consolation Literature in the Northern United States, 1830-1880,” *American Quarterly* 26, No. 5, Special Issue: Death in America (Dec., 1974), pp. 496 <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.unl.edu/stable/2711887> (accessed August 7, 2012).

study will utilize a quasi-Marxist approach to understanding the defeminization and eventual masculinization of the death culture and industry.

Karl Marx defined capitalism as an economic system that focuses on generating an ad infinitum of wealth rather than product or subsistence. For capitalism to succeed, it must first deprive workers the essential tools or methods necessary for their survival. Without these tools, workers are forced to relinquish their *labor power* in favor of monetary transactions to acquire their goods. For the owner of a capitalistic business, they consolidate workers into a specialized force to support and maximize their output. Labor then becomes a commodity that generates capital.³⁰ The success of capitalism in early America allowed for women's removal from the economic and public world.

Historians generally agree that the largest visible shift towards capitalism occurred between 1815 and 1845. During this time the United States transformed its economy from an agricultural to an urban and consumer-based culture. Before this shift, American relied on a subsistence economy that depended on community and family participation to support their communities. Charles Sellers, author of *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846*, argues that these shifts devalued labor and prioritized capital.³¹

Utilizing this capitalistic method, funeral directors eliminated women from the death trade. By specializing and professionalizing the preservation methods of the body using "science", funeral directors denied women access to their own methods of

³⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage Books, 1977) Quoted in Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), xii.

³¹ Charles G. Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 5, Google Books, <http://books.google.com/books?id=AjmGCYAlEcEC&printsec> (accessed August 12, 2012).

preparing the dead. Finally, by funeral directors consolidating all aspects of the death trade under their control, they fully dominated and controlled the economics of the death.³²

To understand these shifting roles, this thesis employs several sources and methodologies. The diaries of Martha Ballard and Elizabeth Drinker provide an invaluable insight into the shifting ideas about women in colonial America and the New Republic. Martha Ballard as first colonial goodwife and then middle-class matron, compared to Elizabeth Drinker's role as a wealthy republican mother, reveals these changes. Close readings of other women's diaries, magazine articles, and pamphlets, as well as published oral histories provide insight into the changing ideals of death culture. The use of post-mortem photographs and clothing sketches provide a visual understanding of America's beautification of death campaign. The use of my digital history project archive, "Capturing Death: The Portrayal of Milwaukee's Death Culture through Death Notices & Obituaries, 1860-1889" signifies the growing influence of the funeral industry.³³

Utilizing a snapshot of death notices, this digital project generated a concept timeline, a geographic map, and concept highlights that tracked the frequency of funeral locations and its expansion between 1860 and 1889. Primarily occurring in the home and occasionally in the church during the 1860s, the funeral expanded to the cemetery and the funeral parlor in 1889. The examination of terminology used in these death notices also symbolizes the growth of the funeral industry. For example, constant suggestions for

³² Boydston, *Home and Work*, xiv.

³³ Briony Zlomke, "Capturing Death: The Portrayal of Milwaukee's Death Culture Through Death Notices & Obituaries, 1860-1889", 2011, <http://segonku.unl.edu/~bzlomke/index.html> under the guidance of Douglas Seefeldt during spring 2011 seminar on Digital History.

families to have bodies embalmed point to the growth of the private funeral and to services offered by funeral directors.³⁴ With each digital analysis tool, the visualization of the growing acceptance of the funeral industry allowed for the unearthing of the shifting changes in the death culture. These primary sources frame the organization of the thesis.

Chapter One examines America's changing social landscape in relation to women's shifting places in society. In comparing the colonial goodwife to the republican mother, we can see conflicting ideologies about women's proper place in society. Originally economic contributors in colonies, the colonial goodwife actively participated within almost all spheres of their community's life. This allowed them to control certain practices that connected both the home and the community, including the events of birthing and dying. As the home emerged as the site of women's "being," homemaking and childrearing became women's sole duties. The republican mother's removal from the capitalistic market estranged them from the economics of death, allowing for their perceptions of death to be altered. Analyses of Elizabeth Drinker's and Martha Ballard's diaries illustrate this changing culture.

Chapter Two charts women's roles in early American death practices from "layers out of the dead" to bystander mourner or spectator. Initially allowed access to laying out the dead by right of their knowledge of preservation techniques, the emergence and professionalization of funeral directors placed women in a subordinate position within the death trade. The commercially accessible funeral directors dominated the death culture with "new, male-defined and male-controlled techniques" learned through formal

³⁴ Briony Zlomke, "Capturing Death: The Portrayal of Milwaukee's Death Culture Through Death Notices & Obituaries, 1860-1889", 2011, <http://segonku.unl.edu/~bzlomke/index.html>

education and science.³⁵ Now considered unsuitable to prepare bodies due to their supposedly delicate natures and lack of scientific knowledge of death, women receded from the “preparation” side of death culture.

Finally, in Chapter Three, the thesis examines women’s roles as mourners, focusing on their participation within the cult of mourning in the 1860s to 1899. Concerned with proper etiquette and dress, women created a mourning culture that adhered to strict Victorian ideas about womanhood and grieving.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, women no longer held a place of honor in the death trade. Relying completely on the services of the funeral director, women and their families lost their intimate connection to preparing the corpses of their loved ones. They placed their complete trust in the director and his scientific abilities to officiate funerals and burials. When Anne Ellis commented on the death of her daughter on August 30, 1907 from diphtheria, she lamented the severing of this connection between women and death culture with the establishment of the funeral industry. “I would not let her be taken to the undertaker’s, but did all things for her myself.”³⁶

³⁵ Rundbland, From “Shrouding Woman” to Lady Assistant, 4-5.

³⁶ Ellis, *The Life of an Ordinary Women*, 265.

CHAPTER ONE

“That Awful Business Commenced”: Colonial Goodwives, Republican Mothers, and the Transformation of the Death Culture in Early America

From 1785 to 1812, Martha Ballard, an American midwife and healer, detailed her daily life and business interactions in her diary. In 1790, she recorded only 77 days when she remained at home and without visitors. For the rest of the year, she traveled throughout her rural Hallowell, Maine community offering her midwifery services to neighbors and family. When she was not tending to her neighbors, Ballard was growing cabbages or spinning her own linen to help sustain her family’s income. This year was typical in the life of Ballard, who fulfilled her duty as a colonial “goodwife” by ensuring the prosperity of both her family and community primarily through her work as a midwife.¹

470 miles away in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Elizabeth Drinker, a wealthy Quaker woman also kept a diary. Born around the same year as Martha Ballard,² Drinker’s daily adult life differed greatly from Ballard’s own experiences. Although both women participated in daily household chores, Drinker lived a genteel life, a lifestyle that demanded servants and minimal housework. Beginning in 1758 and ending with her death in 1807, Drinker’s diary recorded her daily activities, societal events, and her intellectual musings.³ As a Republican mother, Drinker felt no need or desire “to look for

¹ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, “Housewife and Gadder: Themes of Self-sufficiency and Community in Eighteenth Century New England,” in *“To Toil the Livelong Day” America’s Women at Work, 1780-1980*, ed. Carol Groneman and Mary Beth Norton (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987), 24; Ulrich, *A Midwife’s Tale*, 3-35.

² There are slight discrepancies here in what year Martha Ballard and Elizabeth Drinker were born. It is figured that they were born between 1734 and 1745.

³ Elizabeth Sandwith Drinker, *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker: The Life Cycle of an Eighteenth Century Woman*, ed. Elaine Forman Crane (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1994), ix-xix.

comfort” outside of her family. Her life revolved primarily around her duties as a mother and wife.⁴ Born in colonial America and dead within five years of one another in the New Republic, Ballard and Drinker’s lives reflected changing ideologies about women’s place in society. Understanding these evolving notions about women’s roles is crucial to contextualizing death culture and rituals during the period.

The diaries of Ballard and Drinker reveal that women were indispensable economic contributors to colonial American society, and participated in the public and private spheres of their communities. Following the conclusion of the American Revolution however, the social hierarchy of America transformed. As the nation cemented its new foundation as a republic, it did not expect women to assume as many public roles to support the country as they had during the colonial period. As the new republic transitioned from a democracy that was “restrained and deferential” to an “aggressive, egalitarian, modern participatory democracy,” its citizens began to redefine their status within the country.⁵ Women abandoned roles that required extensive participation in the public sphere and focused intensively on only two roles, mother and wife. This ideology that ascribed to women motherhood and caretaker of the home became more grounded with the emergence of a recognizable middle-class.⁶

Throughout the new republic, women worked beside their husbands on farms and in shops and actively shared in the responsibility of ordering the economic, religious and

⁴ Drinker, *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*, 242.

⁵ Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (New York: Norton, 1986), 1.

⁶ Ellen M. Plante, *Women At Home in Victorian America: A Social History* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1997), 36.

social functions of society, including the maintenance of death rituals and mourning.⁷ The malleable gender hierarchy allowed women the mobility to assist in the economy. There were very few inappropriate occupations for women to perform; these jobs included tavern keeper, blacksmith, barber, gunsmith, or tanner.⁸ As Carl Degler argued, the colonial woman was “more than a housekeeper; she was an indispensable part of the apparatus of survival.”⁹ The society and economy could not fully function or survive without women’s contributions. Thus, women who successfully contributed to their community and home were dubbed ‘good wives.’

Upon marriage in colonial America and in the early Republic, the ordinary woman received the title ‘goodwife.’ For the majority of time this title would be shortened simply to “Goody” followed by the woman’s surname—e.g. “Goody Smith”. As a goodwife, a woman’s responsibilities and duties rested with her family and community before her government.¹⁰ The majority of her activities began and revolved around the home, the core of colonial American society.¹¹ Although in these women’s worlds, their husbands were the patriarchs of the home, women’s work created and sustained the community. According to Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, “Economic and social differences might divide a community; the unseen acts of women wove it together.”¹² A

⁷ Before the American Revolution, women were valued economic participants in the colonial world. With the lack of labor power and large industry, the colonial community was initially supported by family production. This mandated that every member of family contribute to the success of the colony.

⁸ Jean E. Friedman and William G. Shade, eds., *Our American Sisters: Women in American Life and Thought* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1976), 5-6.

⁹ Carl Degler, *Out of the Past: The Forces That Shaped Modern America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970). 55-56.

¹⁰ Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), xiii-3. According to Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, the colonial woman simultaneously assumed several distinct and concrete roles within her community and home in order to garner success and participate in the larger community.¹⁰

¹¹ Ulrich, “Housewife and Gadder,” 25.

¹² Ulrich, *A Midwife’s Tale*, 96.

woman's work and household linked her entire family to her larger community.¹³ Martha Ballard embodied the ideal traits of a goodwife.

Born in 1735 in the small town of Oxford, Massachusetts, Martha Moore Ballard's early life is relatively unknown. Public records verify that she married surveyor and later tax collector Ephraim Ballard in 1754 and birthed nine children between the years 1756 and 1779. However, much of the information surrounding her life is found in her diary, which she began in 1785.¹⁴

Ulrich notes Ballard's decision to keep a diary may have stemmed from several different motives. She may simply have used it to keep track of local history, to offer her daily activities a sense of stability, or to keep record of births in the community.¹⁵ However, the larger question surrounding her diary is why Ballard began her diary specifically in 1785—almost five years after the birth of her last child and seven years after her first midwife experience? This was a year after Ephraim become a selectman, a post that placed him prominently within their rural community.¹⁶ It could be attributed to Ballard and her family's social mobility or to her status as a midwife within the community that had reached a new stage; she would deliver 816 children in the community between 1785 and 1812.¹⁷ Her diary provides an insight into the social landscape of America's rural communities and her expected roles as mother and midwife.

¹³ Boydston, *Home and Work*, xv.

¹⁴ Rigorously analyzed and edited by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, the diary offers a glimpse into Ballard's life as a midwife, wife, mother, and a neighbor.

¹⁵ Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale*, 5; Film Study Center and Harvard University, "Martha Ballard Timeline," Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, <http://dohistory.org/timeline/frameset2.html> (accessed May 17, 2012).

¹⁶ Film Study Center and Harvard University, "Martha Ballard Timeline," Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, <http://dohistory.org/timeline/frameset2.html> (accessed May 17, 2012).

¹⁷ Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale*, 5.

Ballard would continue writing until she delivered a baby in July 1778. She died a month later.¹⁸

Unlike Ballard, Elizabeth Drinker's diary spans almost her entire life. On October 8, 1758, Elizabeth Drinker nee Sandwith recorded her first diary entry. She wrote, "First Day, drank Tea at Jos. Howell's; call'd to see M. Foulk, who was lyeing in with her Daughter Elizabeth."¹⁹ Only twenty-three years old, Elizabeth, a wealthy Philadelphia Quaker, began a lifelong tradition of recording her daily life from her youth to her elderly years. Drinker's diary offers a deeper glimpse than Ballard's into her thoughts and lifestyle. She married Henry Drinker, a member of the shipping and importing firm James and Drinker, on January 13, 1761. She bore nine children but only five survived past childhood.²⁰ Throughout her diary, Drinker suggests an invested interest in her children. Although the events of her children's births were not recorded, information about their childhood and health fill Drinker's pages. Her detailed entries about her children reveal her role as a Republican mother.

As a republican mother, a term coined by historian Linda Kerber, a woman's sole role and responsibility was to be a mother and a wife. In post-Revolutionary America, society redefined womanhood, to focus on "private mortality and sentiment" while recognizing that children could be socialized politically and religiously within the home.²¹ This new concept of womanhood transitioned women's roles from concrete active participation within society to abstract indirect involvement.²² Middle-class women's responsibilities no longer revolved around the community and the home, but

¹⁸ Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale*, 11.

¹⁹ Drinker, *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*, 4.

²⁰ Drinker, *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*, 23.

²¹ Boydston, *Home and Work*, 56.

²² Ulrich, *Good Wives*, 38.

rather, directly around their children and homes. It was Elizabeth Drinker's civic responsibility to be a mother and a wife; to educate and nurture her sons and daughters in their future civic duties to the new republic by instilling in them morality and virtue. To assume this posture, many women gave up their public political activism and retreated behind the doors of their homes to take on their new roles as republican mothers and wives.

No longer actively leading and participating in the economy of their states, middle-class republican mothers' began slowly losing control over occupations once exclusively held by women. From textile production to midwifery services, these positions originally fell specifically within the "female economy". According to Laurel Ulrich, a "female economy" revolved around the bartering of local production between the women in a community. However, the emergence of the capitalist economy transitioned these women's positions from unpaid labor to wage defined employment.²³ With this shift, women's participation in death culture became curtailed. As stated earlier, although Drinker and Ballard shared generational similarities, their diaries and lifestyles represent their changing roles in the new republic. One of the strongest differences between the two women can be seen in their experiences with the changing attitudes towards the rituals of death.

²³ Before the industrial revolution, textile production was divided by gender. Women were responsible for spinning, while skilled male craftsmen wove and finished the cloth. By the industrial revolution and the development of factories, these divided positions were categorized under one description of weaver. For midwives, they began to face the challenges of the growing professionalization of the doctor. The medical community displaced the competition of midwives by claiming their expertise and certification in health and sexuality. See Adrienne D. Hood, "The Gender Division of Labor in the Production of Textiles in Eighteenth-century Rural Pennsylvania (Rethinking the New England Model)," *Journal of Social History* 27, no. 3 (Spring 1994): 537-539, *America: History & Life*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 22, 2013); Boydston, *Home and Work*, 31, 58; Stephen Innes, *Work and Labor in Early America* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture by the University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 36; Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale*, 199; John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988), 146.

When the first English colonists landed on the shores of North America in the spring of 1607 to establish the Jamestown colony, death occurred almost instantly. Out of the original 104 men and boy settlers, only 38 were alive by January of 1608.²⁴ Burial grounds for these settlers were uncovered only in 1994 beneath the Jamestown fort. The bodies were apparently buried during the night, many without coffins, to obscure the number of deaths from Native Americans and/or because the deceased passed away from contagious diseases. Many corpses were also buried fully clothed or in shrouds.²⁵

Unable to sustain themselves individually, the colonists relied on their community, neighbors and family to survive. The establishment of a graveyard reflected the beginnings of a community. Unlike the Jamestown community, the 1620 Plymouth, Massachusetts's colonists included women. Facing the same hardships of disease and winter as the Jamestown colony, many of the first Plymouth settlers did not survive the first year. The settlers of Plymouth were different from those in Jamestown because they established a traditional burial site, Cole's Hill within their first year. Although the Pilgrims continued to bury their dead at night, they focused their burials in one central location. Buried on the shores near the surviving settler's dwellings, the dead were concealed by level earth. The Pilgrims did not place burial markers over the graves to conceal the high death rate from attacking Native Americans. They viewed this practice as a measure of security. When Cole's Hill became full, the settler's established Burial Hill in 1638.²⁶

²⁴ These men and boys came to Virginia to claim fertile lands. No women were on the first ships to Jamestown.

²⁵ Marilyn Yalom, *The American Resting Place: 400 Years of History Through Our Cemeteries and Burial Grounds* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 2008), 4-5.

²⁶ James Thatcher, *History of the Town of Plymouth; From Its First Settlements in 1620, To The Year 1832* (Boston: Marsh, Capen & Lyon, 1832), 29.

Burial Hill may have been chosen for several reasons. Placed upon the hill, this site allowed the settlers to utilize it as a natural defense measure; it prevented surprise attacks. Secondly, the church and meetinghouse also sat upon this site. This allowed the settlers to continue the tradition of burying the deceased within the church's yard. As it became the primary burial ground for Plymouth, Massachusetts, Burial Hill began incorporating tombstones to mark the resting places of the deceased. As relationship with Native Americans no longer required the concealment of graves, the settlers began utilizing tombstones to designate their places of burial.²⁷

Why did a colony completely inhabited by men randomly bury their dead underneath a fort, while a colony that was populated by both men and women almost immediately establish a graveyard for their deceased? Each colony faced hardships, disease, and innumerable deaths as fledgling settlements. Jamestown eventually established an Anglican church and their own churchyard for burials almost fifteen years after the first colonists arrived in the area and only two years after the first women arrived in the colony.²⁸ Male colonists did not initially control the domestic spheres of society, instead shaping their community through participation in the economy and public political sphere. In contrast, women united their community through the deliverance of children and the preparation of the deceased, serving as caretakers of life and death.

Women assumed the role of caregiver to the dead. Their actions demonstrated continuity within the traditions that were later adapted and adopted by the male funerary profession. In "Exhuming Women's Pre-market Duties in the Care of Dead," Georganne Rundblad refers to women's roles in this early American death culture as part of a host of

²⁷ Yalom, *The American Resting Place*, 6; Thatcher, *History of the Town of Plymouth*, 29; Samuel Roads, JR., *A Guide to Marblehead* (Marblehead, Massachusetts: Merrill H. Graves, 1881), 44.

²⁸ Yalom, *The American Resting Place*, 6.

“pre-market duties.” The use of the terminology “pre-market” signifies that care of the dead transitioned from a non-profit occupation to a commercial profit-based business. A critical aspect of death as a pre-market occupation was the practice of death rituals within the home. Primarily the women’s domain, the house was where life began and ended. This placed death within women’s responsibilities. Second, social norms considered it highly improper for a man to prepare a woman’s body. Female undertaker, Eleanor Girodat’s statement in *The American Funeral Directing* magazine, evinces pre-market ideas about proper care techniques for the deceased:

In the days of our grandparents, when neighbors assisted one another, when a death occurred, no one ever thought of allowing a man to care for the dead body of a woman. Some Kind neighbor was there. She relieved the family of all anxiety; she was there to perform a last sacred duty of the dead. The presence of a man in the death room would not have been tolerated for an instant.²⁹

Writing in 1919, Girodat’s refers to her grandparents’ generation, noting that the preservation of the dead did not change drastically in the late 1800s until the advent and society’s full acceptance of the funeral director. Because death happened in the home, women generally prepared both male and female bodies after death. Women passed this knowledge down generationally from mothers to daughters.³⁰

Women’s knowledge of death was intimately tied to their experience with birth. During the colonial and new republic period, at the event of a birth, the midwife, female neighbors and relatives would arrive at the birthing mother’s home to assist one another. This phenomenon of “social childbirth” offered a setting in which a woman training to be a midwife learned from her “superior” midwife and practiced for when she might

²⁹ “Tells Why She is an Undertaker,” 1919 *The American Funeral Director* 42, no 8: 315 quoted in Georganne Rundblad, “From ‘Shrouding Woman’ To Lady Assistant,” 47.

³⁰ Rundblad, “From ‘Shrouding Woman’ To Lady Assistant,” 47-49.

perform her first delivery.³¹ As women handled births, they often out of necessity dealt with maternal and infant mortality. Their knowledge of birth and sudden death gave them the knowledge and expertise to prepare bodies. On average, women living prior to the nineteenth century averaged six to eight births, with only about fifty percent of children surviving past the age of five. About ten percent of infants died within the first year of their life³² with about one maternal death per every two hundred births.³³ With the high frequency of deaths among mothers and children, women embraced death as a fact of life.

In addition to women encountering life and death on a daily basis, their supposedly more caring and intuitive nature theoretically made them the better-suited gender to handle the deceased. Ulrich asserts that it was common for women to travel great distances to help tend the sick and dying as society considered it part of their universal role as caretaker. Christian religion also revered women as the more spiritual and purer sex. Georganne Rundblad argues that the Bible served as a reference for women's caretaking duties. Early Protestant men and women were taught that they should be able to read and live by the Bible. Women were depicted throughout the Bible performing their sacred duties of caring for the dead. In the biblical passage, Luke 7: 37-38, following Jesus' death, Mary "stood at his feet behind him weeping, and began to wash his feet with tears, and did wipe them with the hairs on her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with ointment." This representation of Mary served as an example for early American women in mourning.³⁴

³¹ Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale*, 12.

³² It is difficult to estimate full accurate statistics for infants because stillbirths and miscarriages were not recorded.

³³ Dorothy A. Mays, *Women in Early America: Struggle, Survival, and Freedom in a New World* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2004), 66-69, 100.

³⁴ Rundblad, "From 'Shrouding Woman' To Lady Assistant," 63-65.

The domestication of the home, ideas about women's supposed 'tender natures', and faith-guided models of behavior, all intersected to allow women to maintain their services to the community's dead. Rundblad writes, "At the same time, since the care of the dead had not yet become a marketable occupation, society's relegation of women to the home and men to the market, placed the responsibility of preparing the dead for burial in the home, and again, the duty of women."³⁵ This obligation allowed women to service their community in the event of a death with little to no challenges to men's dominance in the marketplace.

By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, death remained a communal occasion. Battling small pox, cholera, yellow fever, and everyday sicknesses and accidents, most communities witnessed death frequently. Although death became even more intensified during moments of epidemics, the regularity of death permeated everyday life. This acceptance and pervasiveness of death equipped community members to engage in death rituals at a moment's notice. Most members of a community immediately understood their role in the event of a death.³⁶ Within the new republic, both Ballard and Drinker encountered death frequently; however, their direct involvement with death culture traditions differed greatly.

Between February 24 and 25, 1798, Drinker recorded three deaths in the community. On February 24, the family received an invitation to attend the funeral of family friend, Ann Pemberton, a week after her death, only to be notified subsequently of the demise of Joseph Drinker, Drinker's husband's first cousin. On February 25,

³⁵ Rundblad, "From 'Shrouding Woman' To Lady Assistant," 65.

³⁶ Robert V. Wells, "A Tale of Two Cities: Epidemics and the Rituals of Death in Eighteenth-Century Boston and Philadelphia," in *Mortal Remains: Death in Early America*, ed. Nancy Isenberg & Andrew Burstein (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 56-57.

Drinker's husband attended the funeral of Joseph Drinker, but after finishing dinner, he received an inquiry for a burial order for Benn Austin. In her diary, Drinker reflected on the past days' events with the simple statement, "What occurrence [is] so common as death?"³⁷ The occurrence of death in Drinker's diary is frequently noted in conjunction with the passing of an individual and receipt of invitations to funerals. Drinker recorded at least 226 funerals between 1760 and 1807, with 1806 containing the largest amount of funerals held. However, Drinker rarely participated in the preparation of the bodies or the planning of the funerals for the deceased. On one rare occasion, Drinker attended to a friend's family in the event of the death of their loved one.³⁸

In April 1798 Drinker's friend and neighbor, Rebecca Waln, passed away after a bout of illness. Upon receiving this information, Drinker "went over and stay'd with the afflicted children 'till their other friends and relations arrived." Drinker promptly left when a woman, Molly Humphriss, arrived to lay out Waln for burial. Drinker recorded later that she did not want to be present when "that awful business commenced."³⁹ Drinker's words seem prescient, as the funeral business would soon displace death rituals controlled by women and intimate communities. For a woman who readily experienced death within her society, Drinker's actions reveal that the responsibility of preparing the

³⁷ Elizabeth Sandwich Drinker, February 1798, *Diary of Elizabeth Sandwich Drinker*, vol. 2, ed. Elaine Forman Crane (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991), 999-1008. <http://solomon.nwld.alexanderstreet.com.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/cgi-bin/asp/philo/nwld/getdoc.pl?S8568-D065> (accessed January 22, 2013).

³⁸ Elizabeth Sandwith Drinker, 1735-1807, *Diary of Elizabeth Sandwith Drinker*, February, 1798, in *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*, vol. 2. Crane, Elaine Forman, ed.. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1991, pp. 999-1008. <http://solomon.nwld.alexanderstreet.com.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/cgi-bin/asp/philo/nwld/getdoc.pl?S8568-D065> (accessed January 22, 2013). <http://solomon.nwld.alexanderstreet.com.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/cgi-bin/asp/philo/search3t?dbname=nwld&CONJUNCT=PHRASE&word=funeral&CONJUNCT=PHRASE&DISTANCE=3&PROXY=or+fewer&alternatenames=Drinker&agewriting=&marriagestatus=&maternstatus=&agemarriage=&nummarriages=&agefirstchild=&numchildren=&nationality=&authrace=&religion=&occupation=&docyear=&docmonth=&doctype=&setting=&wwritten=&wwrittenregional=&historical=&ersonalevent=&allsubject=&docid=&POLESPAN=5&OUTPUT=DF> (accessed January 22, 2013).

³⁹ Drinker, *Diary*, 2: 1022-39.

body no longer fell to her. The responsibility now lay with Molly Humphriss, whose occupation appeared to be a shrouder of the dead or a midwife, as she attended to several bodies throughout the community.⁴⁰ While Drinker forfeited any responsibility to the deceased, Ballard's occupation demanded that she participate in colonial death culture, especially in the case of infant deaths and deaths of women in childbirth.

As a midwife, who delivered over 250 infants, Ballard witnessed first-hand life and death. Although Ballard did not lose her first mother to childbirth until August 20, 1787, when Susanna Clayton succumbed to Group A hemolytic streptococci, her exposure to death remained steadfast. After Susanna's death, Ballard remained in the Clayton's home to help prepare Susanna for burial as she believed was her duty.⁴¹ Several times throughout her diary, Ballard noted that she remained at the home of the deceased to help the family prepare their loved one for burial. The death of community members and the rituals surrounding the preparation of the bodies suggest an evolving death culture in early America.

With the development of urban identity and evolving ideologies of womanhood, Drinker's daily life adhered remarkably to the new republican mother ideology. Raising children for the new republic allowed her to become more attuned with national events. Furthermore, her middle-class status allowed her the luxury to reflect on local social events. For Ballard, her responsibilities still remained with her close-knit rural community. Although she makes note of George Washington's passing, her occupation and community received her attention first and foremost. Despite community and national deaths, personal losses also shaped women's experiences with death. Although

⁴⁰ Drinker, *Diary*, 2: 695.

⁴¹ Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale*, 44.

each woman's personal reflections suggest shifting viewpoints on the role of religious doctrine in the event of a death, the rituals of mourning the dead remained relatively the same in each woman's community.

The expression of grief over death is most evident in Drinker's diary. On September 25, 1807, Drinker's oldest daughter, Sally, died after suffering an illness. Upon her daughter's death Drinker stopped writing in her diary for three days. Resuming writing on September 28, Drinker could not "recollect" the last three days. However, she took assurance in knowing that Sally died well "without struggle, sigh, or groan." Drinker only buried Sally after there was "an apparent change" in her body, "which always should be the case."⁴² The presence of decomposition verified the absence of life.⁴³ Both Drinkers' conception of death and the rituals involved in preparing Sally's body for burial reveal both shifting perceptions of woman's grieving while embracing old death practices.

Before the development of modern medical technology, community members and physicians relied on certain tactics to properly diagnosis a death. The most common prognosis, dating back to ancient civilizations, required a family laying out the deceased for an extended period of time. Most families were only certain that their loved one had passed once decomposition began.⁴⁴ Although putrefaction guaranteed a sign of death, other methods were employed for the declaration of death. In 1707, Giovanni Maria Lancisi, physician to Pope Clement IX, published a list of tests to determine death - the use of a mirror to check for respiration of the mouth, sneezing powder, smelling salts,

⁴² Drinker, *Diary*, 2: 2079-2082.

⁴³ Jan Bondeson, *Buried Alive: The Terrifying History of Our Most Primal Fear* (New York: Norton, 2001), 137.

⁴⁴ Christine Quigley, *The Corpse: A History* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1996), 187.

tufts of wool to be placed into the nostrils, and a full goblet to be placed on a diaphragm to verify respiration. Regardless of these methods, Lancisi declared that the lack of a pulse was the most fundamental assessment of death; however, a physician must take care not to mistakenly check his own pulse.⁴⁵ Exhumations have confirmed that premature burial occurred frequently with the telltale signs of nail marks on coffins' lids and distorted bodies of those who attempted to escape an early burial.⁴⁶ Even George Washington stipulated certain conditions following his death. "Have me decently buried, but do not let my body be put into a vault in less than two days after I am dead."⁴⁷ For Drinker to wait and bury Sally after decomposition began suggests that she continued to adhere to centuries old methods of declaring someone deceased.

Additionally, the ability for Sally to die at home and surrounded by her loved ones adhered to the concept of *ars moriendi*, or the art of dying. One of the most essential processes of "the good death" was the presence of family members at the time of death.⁴⁸ That Drinker did not proclaim Sally's death to God, as did Ballard in the journal upon the occasions of several deaths, indicates that there was a change in societal attitudes about death as God-willed.

For Ballard, grief was almost always associated with the concept of God. On November 8, 1798, Ballard's daughter Lucy Ballard Towne passed away after a long and lengthy illness. Throughout her daughter's illness, Ballard nursed her and hoped for Lucy's eventual recovery, but when Lucy passed, Ballard attributed her death to God's will. She wrote, "may God grand us all hearts to Submit to his will and to hear the Call,

⁴⁵ Bondeson, *Buried Alive*, 27.

⁴⁶ Bondeson, *Buried Alive*, 13.

⁴⁷ Quigley, *The Corpse*, 187.

⁴⁸ Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 6-10.

be also ready.”⁴⁹ This proclamation to God would be carried throughout Ballard’s diary. When Ballard’s neighbor’s daughter, Nabby Andros fell ill, Ballard expressed a prayer that God may unburden Nabby’s suffering. “May God be please to shine on her soall by the influence of his holy spirit and giv her comphort before shee goes hence to be here no more.”⁵⁰ In spite of her commitment to God, Ballard did memorialize and grieve for her all children. Although she does not bluntly declare her grief, as Drinker did, her actions suggest that she may have grieved in her own way. After Lucy’s death, Ballard continued to record her daily events, but remained at home for a period of days. She also memorialized the deaths of her other children by commemorating the anniversary of each child’s death.⁵¹ By placing everything in God’s hands and resuming her duties, Ballard continued with her goodwife duties.

As a midwife, Ballard understood the terms of death. On numerous occasions, Ballard documented assisting in preparing corpses for burial. Although, she makes little reference or detailed explanation on the methods utilized, her sentences describe procedures that were consistently used in the city. On March 31, 1790, Mrs. Craig safely delivered a daughter. However, within a few days, Mrs. Craig fell in and in a week became “exceeding ill.” Called in for assistance, Ballard administered “Clistor [enema] of milk, water, & salt.” When it became apparent that Mrs. Craig would die, Ballard remained dutifully at her family’s side to provide assistance. Once passed, Ballard prepared Mrs. Craig for burial. She “put on her grave cloaths” and remained with the family for the duration of the night. The next day, Mrs. Craig was placed in her coffin in

⁴⁹ Film Study Center and Harvard University, “Martha Ballard Timeline,” Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, <http://dohistory.org/timeline/frameset2.html> (accessed May 17, 2012).

⁵⁰ Ulrich, *A Midwife’s Tale*, 252.

⁵¹ Ulrich, *A Midwife’s Tale*, 12-13.

the west room of the house. By this time, her corpse appears to have already begun decomposing, as Ballard noted the “purge & smell very offensive.” Mrs. Craig was then buried on the 14th of April.⁵²

Ballard’s methods of the preparing the deceased reflects a continuity in death practice that remained strongly intact in both her community and Drinker’s—the certification of death. While Ballard does not outright declare that Mrs. Craig’s family waited for decomposition to set-in, Ballard’s record of Mrs. Craig’s smell indicates the family waited until death was confirmed to bury her.

Conclusion

In early America, a woman’s work and household duties originally linked her and her entire family to the larger community in both life and death. Although in these women’s worlds, their husbands were still the patriarchs of the home, women’s work initially created and sustained the community. However, with ideologies of womanhood shifting and the development of the industrial revolution, women assumed a narrower cultural role as mothers and wives. These new roles ultimately began pushing women out of their female trades, including the caring of the dead. In Martha Ballard’s and Elizabeth Drinker’s diaries, these changes in the perceptions of death are evident. Transitioning from a culture that placed the goodwife in the center of community life and the public square to one that placed the republican mother behind closed doors impacted death rituals. Women’s presence in preparing the dead no longer brought cohesiveness to the

⁵² Ulrich, *A Midwife’s Tale*, 193; Martha Moore Ballard, April 1790, *Diary of Martha Ballard*, ed. Robert McCausland, Cynthia MacAlman McCausland (Rockport, ME: Picton Press, 1992), 972 <http://solomon.nwld.alexanderstreet.com.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/cgi-bin/asp/philo/nwld/getdoc.pl?S223-D065> (accessed January 21, 2013).

community. Instead, burial preparations became business dominated by a male figure - the funeral director.

CHAPTER TWO

“None but loving hands had touched”: The Defeminization of Death Culture and the Funeral Trade

In 1811, the Philadelphia Census Directory contained, among others, six women-- Hannah January, Susanna Bliss, Dorothea Fiss, Rebecca Powell, Elizabeth Robins, and Catherine Wolbert—who shared a common occupation title of “Layer out of the dead.”¹ By 1813, the directory classified these women under their own business section of “Layers Out of Dead.”² This classification appeared among the medical business community of nurses, doctors, midwives, and “Bleeders with Leeches.” This business entry not only included some of the original six women but also expanded to encompass six new women practitioners.³ Seventeen years later, this female exclusive occupation

¹ *Census Directory for 1811 Containing the Names, Occupations, & Residence of the Inhabitants of the City, Southwark & Northern Liberties, A Separate Division Being Allotted to Persons of Colour; To Which is Annexed An Appendix Containing Much Useful Information, And a Perpetual Calendar*, (Philadelphia: Jane Aitken, 1811), n10-403, <http://www.archive.org/stream/philadelphiadire1811phil#page/164/mode/2up/search/dead> (accessed March 15, 2012).

² The 1810 Philadelphia Directory originally listed a “Layers Out Of the Dead” section with only two women, Hannah January and Rebecca Powell. The 1811 Census Directory listed women throughout the directory marked with the title but no business association title. The year 1813 appears to begin the trend of consecutively listing a “Layer Out of the Dead” section; however it also depended on who created the directory. No directory was issued in 1812. James, Robinson, *The Philadelphia Directory, for 1810. Containing the Names, Trades, & Residence, of the Inhabitants, of the City, Southwark, & Northern Liberties.: Also, a Calendar, from the First of March 1810, to the First of March 1811.: And Other Useful Information* ([Philadelphia]: Printed for the publisher, and sold by Wm. Woodhouse, 6, South Front-Steet [sic], 1810), n13, <http://archive.org/stream/philadelphiadire1810phil#page/n3/mode/2up> (accessed March 16, 2012).

³ Robert W. Habenstein and William M. Lamers, *The History of American Funeral Directing* (Milwaukee, WI: Bulfin Printers, 1962), 237-238; John Adems Paxton *The Philadelphia Directory and Register for 1813 (1819)*. By John A. Paxton. (Philadelphia: B. & T. Kite, 1813), 13, <http://archive.org/stream/philadelphiadire1813phil#page/13/mode/2up> (accessed March 17, 2012). There is a small discrepancy in the citation in *The History of American Funeral Directing* and Gary Laderman’s *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799-1883* citation of these sources. On page 237 of *The History of American Funeral Directing* Figure 5 states that material is from an 1810 Philadelphia Directory, but actually appears to be the *Kite’s Philadelphia Directory for 1814*. Laderman cites this figure in *The Sacred Remains* but connects it with the 1810 date. John A. Paxton, *Directory and Register, For 1813: Containing the Names, Professions, And Residence of All the Heads of Families and Persons in Business of the City and Subrubs: With Other Useful Information*, (Philadelphia: B. & T. Kite, 1813), 13,

declined due to the rise of the American undertaker.⁴ By 1860 the Philadelphia City Directory listed only four women “layers out of the dead” but over one hundred male undertakers.⁵ Although women had dominated the specialized occupation of preparing the dead in the early nineteenth century, the advent of the funeral business as a specialty trade initiated the defeminization of death culture. The emergence of the genteel middle-class woman severed women’s place within the economics of death. Considered improper and “unladylike,” the rituals of death were no longer suitable for women’s supposed delicate nature.

The preparation and burial of the body has been a necessary human custom for thousands of years. Considered a practical and symbolic gesture in societies for centuries, preparation of the dead was delegated to a certain gender depending on a culture’s customs. Some cultures believed that it was a sacred duty only to be practiced by women, while other cultures deemed it an unclean or an impure duty and thus, restricted it solely to women. In Ancient Greece, only female relatives prepared the deceased. Deemed a holy duty, the women washed, dressed, and anointed the body with oils for one day. Followers of Judaism also have strict ceremonial restrictions in preparation of the deceased. Divided between both men and women, the preparation of the body depended on the deceased’s sex. In select Hebrew communities, only women touched the deceased

<http://archive.org/stream/philadelphiadire1813phil#page/13/mode/2up/search/dead> (accessed March 15, 2012);

Kite’s Philadelphia Directory For 1814: Containing The Names, Professions, and Residence of Heads of Families and Persons in Business in the City and Suburbs with Other Useful Information (Philadelphia: B & T. Kite, 1814), n17, <http://archive.org/stream/philadelphiadire1814phil#page/n0/mode/2up> (accessed March 15, 2012).

⁴ Laderman, *The Sacred Remains*, 8-9.

⁵ A. McElroy, *McElroy’s Philadelphia City Directory For 1860: Containing the Names of the Inhabitants of the Consolidated City, Their Occupations, Places of Business, and Dwelling Houses: A Business Directory: A List of the Streets, Lanes, Alleys, the City Offices, Public Institutions, Banks, &c. Also, the Names of Housekeepers, &c., In Camden, N.J.* (Philadelphia: E.C. And J Biddle & Co., 1860), 1-1109, <http://archive.org/stream/mcelroysphiladel1860amce#page/n0/mode/2up> (accessed April 28, 2012).

as priests considered it an impure act.⁶ Women's role in the culture and economics of death has varied over human's long history of preparing and burying the human body. Similar to these ancient communities and traditions, colonial Americans established their own methods of preparation of the deceased. From the colonial period until the late nineteenth century, women primarily handled all burial arrangements for the deceased.

Before the introduction and cultural acceptance of modern embalming fluids and the emergence of the modern funeral director, funeral and burial arrangements were almost "exclusively a family affair." With the announcement of a death, friends and relatives immediately arrived to help the bereaved family with the funeral and burial arrangements.⁷ In preparation for the burial, families and caretakers immediately began preparing the body of deceased.

During colonial times, preparers of the dead disemboweled corpses, filled their cavities with charcoal, and then submerged the bodies in alcohol. A second preservation option involved wrapping the body in alum-soaked cloth.⁸ If a death happened in the middle of winter, some families placed the deceased in a coffin and covered it in snow in the woods. However, families had to remember where the body had been placed when the snow melted. Placing the body on a cooling board in the barn until the ground had thawed enough for the body to be buried was another way to preserve the corpse until

⁶ Quigley, *The Corpse*, 52; Yalom, *The American Resting Place*, 30-32. Followers of *kohanim* Jewish faction believe that their priests must not touch the dead as it makes them impure. Cohen priests must only be concerned with life and must pass a series of purifications to enter into a temple. Cohen priests are the descendents of Moses' biblical brother, Aaron. The use of the word of priests is relevant, as these men performed sacred rituals and sacrifices.

⁷ Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), 199.

⁸ Quigley, *The Corpse*, 53.

spring. Whatever the season, the family notified the shrouding woman or “layer out of dead” to assist with burial preparations.⁹

Laying the corpse on a sheet-covered board, the women washed the body of the deceased. If needed, the features were prepared: coins were placed on the eyelids, while a stick was positioned between the chin and breastbone to close the mouth. Finally, the women dressed the deceased in his or her favorite or best outfit. Depending on the weather, large blocks of ice would be placed underneath and around body to help preserve the corpse a little longer for viewing by family and friends.¹⁰

Although the preparation of the body appeared to be simplistic, in reality it revealed knowledge of human anatomy and a specialized skill set. Depending on the season and altitude, a shrouder needed to know the proper preparation techniques to slow decomposition. Martha Ballard mentioned in her journal her accomplishment of making the deceased “lookt as pleasant as when in health and in sweat sleep.”¹¹ By preparing the body, Christians believed that they were giving their deceased their best appearance for the afterlife. Once the women finished preparing the body they would either lay the body out on a bed or place it in the coffin.

Without embalming techniques available to them, a women’s ability to present the deceased in this manner earned them respect for their practice.¹² This specialized gendered knowledge also initially prevented men from participating in the preparation of

⁹ Margaret M. Coffin, *Death in Early America: The History and Folklore of Customs and Superstitions of Early Medicine, Burials, and Mourning* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1976), 78-79.

¹⁰ Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death*, 147.

¹¹ Ulrich, *A Midwife’s Tale*, 257.

¹² Georganne Rundblad, “Exhuming Women’s Premarket Duties in the Care of Dead,” *Gender and Society* 9, no. 6 (Apr., 1995), pp. 180-192, <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.unl.edu/stable/189870> (accessed March 5, 2012).

bodies for burial. A similar argument about specialized knowledge would later be used to prevent women's access to the funeral industry.

Originally women did not charge for their laying out of the dead services. It was considered their responsibility to their community to handle and prepare the deceased. Although merely extensions of the female network already responsible for preparing corpses, women were noted for having an expertise in preparing the dead. Martha Ballard recorded when she herself prepared bodies, but she also mentions Merriam Pollard, the wife of the Amos Pollard, who was the town's sexton and innkeeper. It was Pollard whom Ballard called when she needed assistance in midwifery or laying out the dead.¹³

Considered a general caregiver, Merriam Pollard assisted her community by attending to bedsides and helping with deliveries. However, Pollard, herself, was exceptionally skilled in laying out the dead.¹⁴ A general caregiver sometimes was referred to as a shrouder. These women performed duties informally for their communities, and similar to midwives, shrouders traveled in any weather and at any time of the day to offer their assistance. Most were not paid for their services. In Ballard's journal, there is no evidence of her receiving compensation for her services for laying out the dead. It also appears that neither did Pollard.¹⁵ However, some women began to offer their services as a profession. Primarily residing in urban communities, "layers out of the dead" began advertising their services in the business classifications and charging for their services around 1810.¹⁶

¹³ Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale*, 63, 69; Rundblad, "From 'Shrouding Woman' to Lady Assistant," 76.

¹⁴ Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tales*, 63.

¹⁵ Rundbland, "From 'Shrouding Woman' to Lady Assistant," 78-79.

¹⁶ Rundbland, "From 'Shrouding Woman' to Lady Assistant," 78-79; Quigley, *The Corpse*, 52; Laderman, *The Sacred Remains*, 30.

As women began to transfer the caring of the dead into a market economy, men slowly began infiltrating the occupation. Once men realized they could profit from death, they began assuming control of it—wresting it from its previously female purview. Women began to lose control over funeral services and preparing the body began diminishing by the late 1700s and early 1820s. Furthermore, it was in the bustling and wealthy cities with increasing populations where funeral directors began to flourish.

In the early nineteenth century, men began to assume roles in the preparation for burial services. Shifting the practice away from women's hands and into the market place, men began turning burials into profitable business. Instead of the usurping the title "Layers out of the dead," men simply became "undertakers". The official terminology of undertaker made its first appearance in the early nineteenth century. Undertakers began to claim professional expertise by combining all the services required for a funeral into one consumer product. No longer did a family have to rely on local neighboring women, a coffin maker, the livery-stable keeper, and the sexton to help with services. The undertaker and eventually the funeral director conveniently provided all the necessary services in one space.¹⁷

The undertaker's successful infiltration into the practice of laying out, preparing, and burying the dead was due in part to the rapid population and economic growth of the United States in the early nineteenth century. In 1790 the vast majority of the communities in the states and territories were rural. By 1840, the United States experienced the beginnings of rapid industrial growth despite its overwhelmingly rural population. Between 1840 and 1860 people began migrating to urban areas to take advantage of industrial jobs and markets. It was also during this period that industrial

¹⁷ Coffin, *Death in Early America*, 81.

production swelled fivefold.¹⁸ In 1790 the population of the Philadelphia was 28,522. By 1860 the population was 565,529.¹⁹ As the nation's capital from 1790 to 1800, Philadelphia became a cosmopolitan hub for trading, industry, business, and education. With the beginning of the industrial revolution in the nineteenth century, Philadelphia's population exploded as it received an influx of immigrants seeking employment in the city's new industries.²⁰ This urban growth transformed almost every major city whose economy flourished due to the industrial revolution.

With a rapidly growing urban population, people in the cities could not rely on a personal family member to prepare the body. Families started living further apart and the cramped conditions of the buildings made it difficult for people to host funeral ceremonies. Although families still gathered in the homes upon the death of a loved ones, the ability to hold a funeral in a funeral parlor or a church, allowed families to continue the funerary celebration.²¹

The inability of female death caretakers to pass their knowledge along to a female apprentice in the burgeoning urban landscape created ideal conditions for professional undertakers to prosper. For decades, women shrouders received their knowledge, expertise, and training in the caring for the dead from their mothers, grandmothers, or a community member.²² With the development of modern cities, which often resulted in families living further apart from one another, the ability for shrouders to pass on their

¹⁸ David R. Meyer, *The Roots of American Industrialization* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2003), 3.

¹⁹ Campbell Gibson, "Population of the 100 Largest Cities and Other Urban Places in the United States: 1790 to 1990," US Census Bureau, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0027/twps0027.html> (accessed February 12, 2013).

²⁰ Library Company of Philadelphia, *Center City Philadelphia in the 19th Century* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Pub, 2006), 7.

²¹ Habenstein, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, 439

²² Rundbland, "Exhuming Women's Pre-market Duties in the Care of the Dead," 178.

knowledge became increasingly difficult. For example, the passing of the Boston's 1810 "Rules and Regulations for establishing the Police of the Burying Grounds and Cemeteries [sic], and for Regulating the Burial of the Dead, within the town of Boston, [with] the force of law" also hindered woman's access and participation to the death culture. These new statutes declared that all funerals had to be held during the day (except during epidemics), established the number times of a bell shall toll, and stipulated the number of horses to pull the funeral cart. The statutes even prohibited women from walking in the funeral procession unless they were close family members of the deceased.²³

In an 1819 Boston newspaper, an article summarized the Boston health regulations. The author noted that only licensed undertakers could utilize funeral cars and prepare bodies. If anyone other than a licensed and approve undertaker was caught violating this order, they could expect a fifty dollar penalty imposed upon them.²⁴ These decrees supported the exclusion of women from participating and practicing in laying out the dead, privileging the male undertaker and the funeral director. Interestingly, before they became undertakers, many of these men were cabinetmakers.

Undertakers initially focused on providing the casing for the body for burial, offering coffins along with furnishings for sale.²⁵ In Roman times, the undertaker

²³ Laderman, *The Sacred Remains*, 47-48.

²⁴ "Health of Town, *Weekly Messenger*, August 26, 1819.

http://infoweb.newsbank.com.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/iw-search/we/HistArchive/?p_product=EANX&p_theme=ahnp&p_nbid=C61G55ISM2MDgzNDU0Ny45Njg2NDk6MT0xMzoxMjguMTA0LjEuMjE5&p_action=doc&s_lastnonissuequeryname=4&d_viewref=search&p_queryname=4&p_docnum=2&p_doref=v2:109E8D4710E09E20@EANX-10B663FEA340E318@2385673-10B663FEB8099C90@1-10B663FF6E1F9630@Health+of+the+Town (accessed February 13, 2013).

²⁵ Habenstein, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, 39, 226, 235-245. There is a difference between a casket and a coffin. The word "coffin" refers to the traditional wedge-shaped container while "casket"

registered deaths, embalmed bodies, and arranged the funeral procession and burial of the deceased. Called the *libitinarius*, he conducted his business within the temple of Libitina, the goddess of corpses and funerals. The *libitnarius* was the original funeral director. Although the *libitinarius* controlled all funeral businesses, he delegated certain services to his employees. The *pollinctores* embalmed bodies, the *designator* acted as the master or director of the funeral ceremonies, and the *praeco* convened the participants of the funeral.²⁶

The word “undertaker” itself made its first appearance around 1400; however, its original meaning described someone who undertook an enterprise with no specification of the task. By 1685, the secular profession of the *libitinarius* reached England under the title of undertaker.²⁷ However, unlike the Romans, English undertakers specialized in the furnishing of mourning paraphernalia. Bills from these undertakers listed “grinning skulls and shroud clad corpses, thigh bones, mattocks and pickaxes, hearses and what not.”²⁸ They also provided mourning scarves, hoods, and gloves. An early 18th century undertaker advertisement stated:

For the good of the Publick, I Edward Evans, at the Four Coffins in the Strand, over against Somerset House; Furnish all Necessaries for all sorts of Funerals great and small. And all sorts of set Mourning both Black and Gray and all other furniture suitable to it, fit for any person of Quality. Which I promise to perform 2s. in the Pound cheaper than any other of the Undertakers in Town or elsewhere.²⁹

Although English cabinetmakers and carpenters assisted undertakers by supplying coffins, they eventually began joining the undertaker’s trade.

refers to the rectangular container that is often decorated elaborately. Caskets would eventually replace coffins with the emergence of the funeral industry.

²⁶ Habenstein, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, 39-40.

²⁷ Habenstein, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, 116, 226.

²⁸ Habenstein, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, 170-171.

²⁹ Habenstein, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, 170-171.

The American undertaker trade had a much slower start. With few English undertakers migrating to colonial America, cabinetmakers initially focused on upholstering and cabinet making with the occasional advertisement for coffins. Occasionally, cabinetmakers extended their services to incorporate undertaking services, but most of the time they left the funerary practices to the women. Wider participation in the death trade did not appeal to these men. Unlike English undertakers, American cabinetmakers did not seek the title or privileges associated with the English undertaker. As Habenstein writes, “On the frontier one man was a good as another.”³⁰

As the century progressed, cabinetmakers became the sole provider of the materials needed for coffins and eventually incorporated funeral services into their repertoire. They soon usurped the female craft of caring for the body while relinquishing cabinetmaking and furniture to cabinetmakers.³¹ John P. Walsh calls this absorption of midwifery and shrouder skills as a “reskilled” occupation. Through the merging and assimilating of multiple responsibilities related to death, the undertaker assumed control of a completely new occupation, one that was “reskilled” and redefined as a vocation that required specialized knowledge. However, to command this new occupation, the undertaker (and later) funeral director had to “deskill” midwives and shrouders out of the profession. This redefinition of this premarket trade placed the death culture squarely within the commercial sphere.³²

³⁰ Habenstein, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, 226.

³¹ Habenstein, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, 226-227.

³² John P. Walsh, "Technological Change and the Division of Labor: The Case of Retail Meatcutters." *Work and Occupations* 16 (1989), <http://wox.sagepub.com/content/16/2/165.full.pdf> (accessed February 20, 2013); Rundblad, “Exhuming Women’s Premarket Duties in the Care of Dead,” 181.

Although women had prepared bodies for several centuries, scientists and merchants declared that women's nature and condition did not make them suitable for specialized fields, in which they included preparing corpses for burial. With the expanding industrial society and increasing demarcation of male and female spheres, men slowly began assuming traditionally held women occupations. In 1909, *The Western Undertaker* stated, "we are not accustomed to think of women as physically courageous. A woman...*should* shriek at the sight of a mouse or faint when sees blood."³³ Other newspapers from this era also called for the elimination of women from technical fields. However, men's entrance into the undertaker field was evident as early as the eighteenth century.

In the 1810 Philadelphia directory, fourteen women offered their funerary services. The same directory included the David Evans, a cabinet and coffin maker. A prominent member of Philadelphian society, Evans listed his services for families of the deceased --both the wealthy and poor—dating back to the late eighteenth century. In his own records Evans began tracking his services to the families of the deceased.

Sept. 7, 1780: Estate of William Allen, late Chief Justice, making his Coffin of Mahogany, with Plate, horse hire, and attendance of on the corpse from Mount Airy, L 13.

Aug. 2, 1798: Estate of Col. Innes –Making him Mahogany Coffin, Plate, Handles and Lace L 15. My attendance bringing the corpse from the country L1 10. Muslin for Winding Sheet L1 10.³⁴

These two entries in Evan's daybook reflected the growing prominence of coffin makers in the city. William Allen was a wealthy merchant who became Philadelphia's Chief Justice in 1750. Allen had prominent ties to society. Marrying Andrew Hamilton's

³³ Rundblad, "Exhuming Women's Premarket Duties in the Care of Dead," 181.

³⁴ Coffin, *Death in Early America*, 81.

daughter, Allen influenced the development of the colonial legal system. Colonel Innes also held prominence in society. Fighting in the American Revolution, Col. Innes was an aide to George Washington before becoming the navy commissioner. He would later serve as an attorney general.³⁵ Before his death, he is listed in the Calendar of the Correspondence of James Madison. Madison noted that Col. Innes was ill with gout and dropsy before he continued with political matters.³⁶ For Evans to prepare these leaders' bodies signifies the growing faith in coffin makers. Although a large chunk of his daybook is devoted to the construction of coffins, his participation in and attendance at the laying out of the bodies sheds light on the growing encroachment of men upon a traditionally defined women's duty.³⁷ The ultimate catalyst for the separation between women and the laying out of the dead was the American Civil War.

The Civil War was the bloodiest war the United States had experienced in its short existence. When over 620,000 American soldiers died between 1861 and 1865,³⁸ American perceptions of death changed drastically. As large numbers of young men were killed in the prime of their lives in one battle, death was no longer considered an individual experience, but a collective experience. Every neighborhood within the United States experienced the loss of loved ones. In *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* Drew Faust writes, "Americans had to identify – find invent, create – the means and mechanisms to manage more than half a million dead; their deaths, their

³⁵ Lyon Gardiner Tyler, *Encyclopedia of Virginia Biography, Under the Editorial Supervision of Lyon Gardiner Tyler* (New York: Lewis historical Pub. Co, 1915), 149; [E-book accessed on June 7, 2012, from Google Books database].

³⁶ James Madison, *Calendar of the Correspondence of James Madison* (Washington: Dept. of State, 1894), 398, <http://www.ebooksread.com/authors-eng/james-madison/calendar-of-the-correspondence-of-james-madison-hci/page-43-calendar-of-the-correspondence-of-james-madison-hci.shtml> (accessed June 7, 2012).

³⁷ Coffin, *Death in Early America*, 109.

³⁸ This number excludes civilian deaths.

bodies, their loss.”³⁹ The dynamics and economics of death preparation changed, as soldiers and civilians dealt with the mass casualties of war. With thousands of soldiers dying miles away from the home on the battlefield, women could no longer physically prepare the bodies of their loved ones. The Civil War battlefield as a very public arena in which men died further facilitated the growth of the male-dominated funeral industry.

When a soldier died during the Civil War there were several options for his burial. For the soldier who died in a hospital, he was typically buried near the hospital, while the soldier who died on the battlefield was buried where he fell. The battlefield burial either consisted of being placed in a single grave, a mass grave, or simply covered with a bit of dirt. The actual preparation of these bodies was limited. Most men were left in their uniforms or a blanket was wrapped around their bodies. The use of coffins, especially in the early years of the Civil War, rarely occurred. This form of preparing the body left many families in despair that their loved one was being buried in a “foreign” location. This predicament led to families accepting embalming preservation methods for their dead so that bodies could be shipped “home”.⁴⁰

On May 24, 1861, a Confederate sympathizer killed Union Colonel Elmer Ellsworth. In honor of his heroic sacrifice, Thomas Holmes, an embalmer, preserved his body for his burial. Gaining attention for his embalming techniques, Holmes established his embalming business in Washington D.C. to service families of soldiers. At one hundred dollars per body, Holmes quickly became a wealthy man after embalming more

³⁹ Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, xi-xviii.

⁴⁰ Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 73.

than 4,000 soldiers. Holmes's ability to make death profitable soon appealed to other embalmers.⁴¹

In the 1863 city directory for Washington D.C, three embalmers listed their businesses. An advertisement for a Dr. F.A. Hutton stated, "Bodies Embalmed by us NEVER TURN BLACK! But retain their natural color and appearance...so as to admit of contemplation of the person Embalmed, with the countenance of one asleep."⁴² Although surgeons sometimes embalmed the bodies of notable soldiers who died in hospitals, they rarely extended this service to the common foot soldier. This offered embalmers and undertakers the opportunity to not only earn a profitable income but also gain recognition from the wider funerary community.⁴³

To earn this respect, funeral directors began declaring embalming an act of science. By removing the act of preserving bodies from community knowledge and practices into the marketplace and the scientific world, funeral directors fostered a new attitude about the "proper" technique for preparing bodies. In addition to embalming, methods of preparing the deceased's features also became updated. Without knowledge of embalming and the new procedures of facial arrangements, women were no longer viewed as reputable caretakers of the deceased. Funeral directors gladly fulfilled these new roles while decreeing a new scientific certification and recognition of their occupation.⁴⁴

The transition from undertaker to funeral director also reflected the growing needs of society. Essentially a merchant, the undertaker, simply provided the goods and

⁴¹ Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 94.

⁴² Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 93-95.

⁴³ Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 93-95

⁴⁴ Rudbland, "From 'Shrouding Woman' to Lady Assistant," 102-110.

materials to a mourning family. With the introduction of the funeral director, the undertaker began professionalizing death rituals.⁴⁵ Seeking to combine multiple funerary services, the funeral director consolidated three primary facilities within their businesses—the clinic, the home, and the chapel.⁴⁶ This professionalization grew out of societal desires for embalming, which became popular during the war. As society began embracing the lengthy preservation of the body, embalmers required proper techniques, facilities, and utensils to perform their trade. Undertakers required bodies be brought to their businesses. With most embalming tools and chemicals too difficult to transport, the funeral home offered communities a central location to bring their deceased. Most funeral directors seized upon the chance to offer their customers a “one-stop shop”. Rather than taking the deceased back to the home, the bereaved could simply hold the funeral in the funeral parlor after the body was prepared.⁴⁷ The rapid growth of cities also spurred the need for funeral parlors. As mentioned earlier, the crowding of inner cities made it difficult for families to perform funerary rites and services in cramped quarters.⁴⁸ Examining all three of these consolidations reveals how women were routinely eliminated from the culture of death. By the mid-nineteenth century, the funeral director participated in and controlled almost all aspects of the funeral.

On his first visit with the deceased’s family, the funeral director initiated the funerary events by placing a funeral badge or door crepe on the family’s front door. This notified the community of the recent death. Depending on who died, the color and type of badge varied: black for the elderly, white for children, and black with white rosette and

⁴⁵ Habenstein, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, 436.

⁴⁶ Habenstein, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, 439.

⁴⁷ Rudbland, “From ‘Shrouding Woman’ to Lady Assistant,” 94,96.

⁴⁸ Habenstein, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, 439.

ribbon for young adults. From 1880 to 1890, a variety of colors were used in the door badges such as grey, purple and lavender. Floral wreaths eventually took the place of the badges.⁴⁹

Yet, even before the funeral director adorned the front entrance, the family began their mourning rituals as dictated by social etiquette. During the nineteenth century, many American families followed strict guidelines for mourning that dictated their attire, the proper way of re-entering society, and the decoration of the home. People faithfully abided by these rules. Families draped their homes with black fabrics. It was common for the entire downstairs, the deceased's room, and mirrors to be decorated in black. Mourners stopped their clocks at the time of the loved one's death. Families required servants to wear mourning attire as well. A maid wore all black except for her apron, cuffs, and collar, which were white. Black ribbons also adorned her cap.⁵⁰

After the family prepared their staff, homes, and themselves for mourning, the funeral director met with the men of the family to plan the funeral. These initial plans included the issuance of death notices, telegrams, and a simple obituary. All decisions among "publicizing" the death were based upon the timing of the burial. Accordingly, the funeral director determined the appropriate preservative actions for the body: embalming or "corpse preserver."⁵¹

As discussed earlier, following the Civil War embalming gradually entered into mainstream burial practices. Although modern embalming tactics dates back to 1663, the

⁴⁹ Habenstein, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, 394-398.

⁵⁰ Habenstein, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, 413.

⁵¹ Habenstein, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, 394-395.

United States did not receive its first patent for embalming until 1856.⁵² Due to embalming's popularity during the Civil War, people slowly began accepting it as a body preserving method, but not without trepidation. People originally considered embalming sacrilegious and feared that it damaged the body. Thus, if the family elected embalming, a relative might watch the process to ensure that the remains were not mutilated. Once the family member realized the non-invasive nature of the procedure, he either left or continued watching the procedure out of curiosity.⁵³

For the "corpse cooler" or "preservers" method, the funeral director placed the body in a specialized ice cooler. This technique involved surrounding the body with ice and cool air. The funeral directors and his assistants had to remain diligent in replacing the ice and draining the excess water. If they failed in this task, a body may decompose more rapidly or even on occasion, explode.⁵⁴

Prices varied little between the two methods. Only during summer months did the "corpse preserver" become more expensive. Initially, embalming cost slightly more than ice cooling, but with time, it became reasonably priced. During the Civil War, it was common for embalmers to charge close to one hundred dollars, as most officer families were willing to pay have their loved ones preserved and shipped home. In the 1870's, prominent funeral directors charged fifteen dollars, and by 1880's, the standard charge was ten dollars.⁵⁵

Many funeral directors preferred embalming to ice cooling because of its advantages. Using ice constantly required someone to watch the body for decomposition.

⁵² Kenneth V. Iserson, *Death to Dust: What Happens to Dead Bodies?* (Tucson, AZ: Galen Press, 2001), 239.

⁵³ Habenstein, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, 394-396.

⁵⁴ Iserson, *Death to Dust*, 227.

⁵⁵ Habenstein, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, 394-396.

If the deceased died of sickness, embalming limited the chance that the disease could spread to the living. In this method, the director disinfected the body and preserved it, so that the living could enjoy the natural state of the deceased. Sometimes directors, in order to assert their authority, played on the sacred or love appeal to convince families to utilize embalming. In the sacred appeal, the body was seen “as the casket of the soul or the temple of the Holy Spirit, [thus] the body deserved sacred respect.” The love appeal was the “affection to seek to avoid, in some degree, a painful separation, by preserving the remains of those they love and whom they were beloved.” Some funeral directors even disclosed the possibility of an exploding body to suggest and push embalming.⁵⁶

Before the use of embalming fluids, bodies sometimes were placed in airtight coffins to preserve the body. This eventually led to the accumulation of gases causing the casket to bulge. To prevent the body from exploding, the coffin needed to be “tapped.” This involved meticulously drilling a hole into the casket and immediately igniting the releasing gases. The burning of the gases lasted anywhere from ten to thirty minutes.⁵⁷ Newspaper accounts documented when bodies exploded.

In the summer of 1890, a Mrs. John Peterson died from dropsy. Weighing close to three hundred pounds, Mrs. Peterson required a special casket; however, with the lack of ice and the increasing heat, her body became swollen. Unable to preserve the body, the mourners immediately placed her body in the casket once it was procured. They further nailed the casket’s top down to slow down the decomposition. The Friday evening before the funeral, mourners watched over the body only to hear a loud boom around midnight. Quickly entering the room, the mourners discovered an exploded Mrs. Peterson. The

⁵⁶ Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death*, 158-162.

⁵⁷ Iserson, *Death to Dust*, 228.

accumulation of gases “burst the glass over the face of Mrs. Peterson. So great was the force of the explosion that the body was shot forward and upward, the head protruding from the coffin.”⁵⁸ With the disastrous circumstances facing the mourners, they decided to immediately bury Mrs. Peterson.⁵⁹ By 1890, embalming was commonly accepted practice for preserving the body, and by the 1920s, almost all bodies were embalmed regardless if they were being transported.

Generally, after embalming the body, the funeral director continued preparing the corpse.⁶⁰ He dressed the body, powdered the face, and placed a clean sheet underneath and over the deceased while propping its head up with a small pillow.⁶¹ Finally, the body was ready for its visitation.

After preparing the body, the director met with the family to finalize the funeral arrangements. This involved selecting a casket. Unlike rural areas, cities had a larger selection of caskets for purchase. Families chose from a catalogue, the directors’ in-shop collection, or a casket manufacturer’s collection. Casket manufacturers started appearing around 1875. One of the earliest was Stein Patent Burial Casket Works located in Rochester, New York. It produced a catalogue offering customers a range of caskets in various styles, compositions, and prices. For example, selections included caskets made out of walnut, rosewood, mahogany, or oak. Metallic and bronze caskets were available, as well as the traditional black casket for adults and white for children.⁶² If a family

⁵⁸ The type of casket Mrs. Paterson originally body was placed in most likely had a plate glass. Plate glass allowed for the mourners to view the body without having to fully open the casket. Hallunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Woman*, 170.

⁵⁹ “The Coffin Blew Up. Many Difficulties Attend the Burial of Mrs. John Peterson,” *New York Herald*, July 21, 1890.

⁶⁰ Before the embalming process, the director would have washed and plugged all orifices. This also included closing the eyes with eye-caps, and clamping the mouth shut with either stitches or a chin support.

⁶¹ Habenstein, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, 399.

⁶² Habenstein, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, 148, 277, 400-401.

chose a casket from a catalogue, problems could arise, primarily with shipping. In the event that the casket did not arrive on time, the funeral would have to be prolonged and preservation of the body could be endangered; however embalming eliminated worries about the preservation of the body.⁶³

Once a casket arrived at its destination, families proceeded with the funeral. As in rural areas, funerals in the city took place either in the home or at a church. Urban families additionally had the option to hold the funeral in a funeral director's parlor. The funeral director supervised the ceremony, ensuring that the funeral ran smoothly, with as few complications as possible for the family. If a funeral director's business was successful, he hired assistants and hearse drivers to help with the ceremony.⁶⁴

Following the funeral service, the funeral director arranged a funeral cortege, or funeral procession. While the body was placed in a hearse, the family and friends had to be arranged in carriages. A typical procession adhered to the following line-up: clergymen, flower carriages, honorary pallbearers, active pallbearers, hearse, immediate family, relatives, and finally, friends. The flower carriage was added to the procession solely to transport the flowers. Flowers became an essential part of the funeral. They helped mask the smell of the death, beautified the death scene, and were a sign of respect and sympathy for the bereaved while honoring the deceased. The use of specific flowers also notified the larger public of the deceased's age, gender, occupation, and marriage status.⁶⁵ If the deceased belonged to an organization, the organization walked ahead of

⁶³ Habenstein, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, 277, 400-401.

⁶⁴ Habenstein, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, 404-405.

⁶⁵ Stanley B. Burns M.D. and Elizabeth Burns, *Sleeping beauty II: grief, bereavement and the family in memorial photography, American & European traditions* (New York: Burns Archive Press, 2002), 85; Michael P. D'Amato, *Horse-Drawn Funeral Vehicles: 19th Century Funerals* (Bird-in-Hand, Pa: Carriage Museum of America, 2004), 306-322.

the entire procession. If the distance to the cemetery was too far, the organization walked only a few blocks or stopped at the city limits.⁶⁶

Decorated with black plumes, the hearse was the most noticeable carriage of the entire procession. In the late nineteenth century, plumes were of great symbolic importance in a funeral because they notified people of the deceased's status by the number of plumes present: "An absence of plumes indicated that the deceased was poor; two plumes that he was of moderate circumstances; three or four plumes, fairly well-to-do; five or six, well-off; and seven or eight, rich."⁶⁷ Emblems and deck ornaments eventually replaced plumes, and by the early 1900's, the hearse's top went undecorated.⁶⁸ If the deceased was a child, the funeral director provided a simple white miniature hearse drawn by one horse. The size of the procession also indicated the deceased's social status. A large number of people involved in the procession revealed the extent of connections and friendships with the deceased.⁶⁹

Once at the cemetery, the funeral director guided the pallbearers in placing the casket over the grave. After the casket was positioned, he signaled the preacher to begin the burial services. As the clergyman said the "Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust," liturgy, the funeral director or the preacher sprinkled dirt over the casket. The pallbearers then lowered the casket, under the supervision of the funeral director, into the ground. The filling of the grave almost always happened after the family left.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Habenstein, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, 406, 408-411.

⁶⁷ Habenstein, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, 409.

⁶⁸ Habenstein, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, 365.

⁶⁹ Habenstein, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, 410-411.

⁷⁰ Habenstein, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, 411.

Conclusion

As controllers of all aspects of the funeral business, funeral directors transformed a skilled female-dominated practice into a recognized profession. By 1882, the National Funeral Directors' Association held their first national and official meeting in Rochester, Michigan. In this meeting, the organization outlined the official duties and responsibilities of a funeral director. The organization decided on three main goals, "education, professionalization, and financial security." Additionally, they wanted the same recognition as doctors⁷¹ and lawyers that would allow them to service their communities. It was in this same meeting that the delegation declared they needed a new title, as undertaker was "so inexpressive and so misplaced." The title of funeral director was openly embraced.⁷² No longer called undertakers, these men became directors of death culture.

With the growing professionalization and solidification of the funeral industry and the commercialization of its services, funerary practices and death rituals were severed from the domestic sphere. Now considered a masculine endeavor, preparation of the deceased became restricted to men specifically trained and certified in burial and funeral techniques. Only those with the title "funeral director" were seen fit to service the public. No longer suited to service the dead due to their supposed delicate natures and lack of scientific knowledge of corpses and preservation methods, women "layers out of the

⁷¹ Founded in 1847, the American Medical Association's (AMA) ultimate objective was to instill and promote the expertise of its doctors in the medical field. To achieve this goal, the medical community displaced "irregular" competitors, such as midwives and healers, by proclaiming doctors' sole proficiency in matters of health and sexuality. However, this displacement of women healers began long before the emergence of a professionalized medical community. The changing ideas about women's place in society officially barred women from participating in the medical field. Furthermore, medical schools also initially barred women from entrance. See John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 146; Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 57; Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale*, 28.

⁷² Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death*, 150, 154.

dead” all but disappeared from the historical record.⁷³ Deemed the “Angel in the house” during the Victorian era, middle-class women found their responsibilities lay within their separate and secluded sphere in the home. Women who adhered to this ideology sought full satisfaction in their roles as “wife, mother, and domestic manager.”⁷⁴ This new-styled domestication of women allowed them to become stewards of grief. As their hands no longer lovingly prepared the dead for burial, women became the public face of ritualized mourning and grief.

⁷³ Rundblad, “Exhuming Women’s Premarket Duties in the Care of Dead,” 173.

⁷⁴ Christine Bayles Kortsch. *Dress Culture in Late Victorian Women's Fiction Literacy, Textiles, and Activism*. (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2009), 144. [E-book accessed on June 7, 2012, from Google Books database].

CHAPTER THREE

“Of course I couldn’t go on account of my mourning”:¹ Consumerism and the Social Performance of the Grieving Woman

Every evening for sixty-seven years, servants of Prince Albert laid out his clothing and shaving utensils for the next day. For forty of these years, these items remained untouched. Demanded by Queen Victoria upon the death of Prince Albert on December 14, 1861, this daily ritual for the Prince continued posthumously along with other routines until the queen’s own death in January 1901. Suffering the loss of Albert, Queen Victoria immersed herself in her grief and mourning. She slept with a postmortem photograph under her pillow and one of Albert’s nightshirts every evening, and required a marble bust of Albert appear in all family portraits. In addition, Victoria stayed in mourning dress and practiced mourning etiquette for the remainder of her life.²

While Queen Victoria grieved the loss of her husband, across the Atlantic, Mary Todd Lincoln mourned the loss of both her husband and her children. Mary, unlike Queen Victoria whose children all survived to adulthood, lost almost all her children before the tragic death of her husband in 1865. In February of 1850, Mary’s three-year-old son Edward died from consumption. Then, in February of 1862, her son William died (presumably) from typhoid fever. After the death of William, Mary became consumed with her grief. She spent weeks in her bedroom weeping and refused to be comforted. As Mary became more inconsolable, Lincoln eventually showed her the Washington Lunatic Asylum from a window and said, “Mother, do you see that large white building on the

¹ Mary Alsop King Waddington to Henrietta L. King, July 8, 1891, in *Letters of a Diplomat’s Wife* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1903), 417.

² Lou Taylor, *Mourning Dress: A Costume and Social History* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1983), 155-157.

hill yonder? Try and control your grief, or it will drive you mad, and we may have to send you there.”³

Over time, Mary regained her emotional stability only to have it destroyed with the assassination of her husband three years later. Her mental health was further damaged by the loss of her eighteen-year-old son Thomas to consumption on January 15, 1871. Her eldest son, Robert, survived into adulthood; however, he and Mary did not have a close relationship after the death of Thomas. Their relationship became further estranged when Robert committed Mary to Bellevue Place sanatorium for her “eccentric” behavior.

⁴ Mary continued to mourn her losses until her own death on July 16, 1882.⁵

Although both of these women’s public mourning may appear excessive to today’s standards, both Mary Todd Lincoln and Queen Victoria’s display of mourning were not unique in the nineteenth century. Throughout the nineteenth century, on both sides of the Atlantic, Americans and Europeans followed a “highly ritualized and codified” practice of grief and mourning, referred to as the “Cult of Memory” or “Cult of Mourning.” This period in United States saw the development of a sentimental death culture. Transitioning from a culture rooted in the reverence of God’s will and physical acceptance of death, society immersed itself in the expressions of mourning, bereavement, and sympathy. These new expressions directly focused on the mourning of

³ Maureen DeLorme, *Fashionable Mourning Art and Jewelry* (Atglen, Pennsylvania: Schiffer Publishing Ltd, 2004), 27-28.

⁴ Robert originally shared a closer relationship with his mother than with his father. Robert’s relationship with Lincoln remained more distant, as Lincoln traveled for much of Robert’s youth for speeches or at court. Mary and Robert’s relationship was reconciled in May 1881, after Mary returned to Springfield, Illinois after living in abroad in Europe.

⁵ Jason Emerson, *Giant in the Shadows: The Life of Robert T. Lincoln* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012), 24; Myra Helmer Pritchard, *The Dark Days of Abraham Lincoln’s Widow, As Revealed by Her Own Letters*, ed. Jason Emerson (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011), 150-151; Dawn Langley Simmons, *A Rose for Mrs. Lincoln: A Biography of Mary Todd Lincoln* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 193; Kenneth J. Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011), 122-123.

the deceased and conveying sympathy and condolences to the bereaved,⁶ and more than anyone else, middle-class women upheld these new mourning ideals. Expected to properly emulate these new bereavement standards, women seriously expressed this new dimension of mourning by following strict guidelines in the adorning of mourning attire and women charged themselves, and their peers, to present proper mourning behavior and decorum.⁷ While all Americans openly mourned in the nineteenth century, middle- and upper middle-class women became the ultimate face of grief and social mourning.

In any era, clothing reflects societal attitudes and marks the social standing of individuals. By wearing particular styles of clothing, individuals signify their wealth, religious beliefs, social class and/or political affiliation to society. Clothing also enforces class divisions. The use of mourning clothing originally signified one's place in society. Although they were reserved for the aristocracy and royalty in Europe, mourning fashions eventually were emulated by the masses in Europe and eventually transported to the American colonies. Through the examination of European mourning fashions, the foundation and history of mourning clothing and etiquette in American culture emerges more clearly.⁸

During the Renaissance Era, the Court of Heralds, a European legislative body, regulated society's dress and ensured the divisions of class. This body punished anyone who dressed above their class or in an inappropriate way. The Court was commonly present at funerals for nobility in order to control mourning attire and etiquette. The

⁶ Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, 124.

⁷ Martha V. Pike and Janice Gray Armstrong, *A Time to Mourn: Expressions of Grief in Nineteenth Century America* (Stony Brook, N.Y.: Museums at Stony Brook, 1980), 13.

⁸ Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 19-20.

absence of Heralds revealed the royalty's displeasure with the family or indicated that the family lacked merit.⁹

The mourning customs of the nobility soon found rivalry from the growing merchant class.¹⁰ In 1668, the Baron de Willebroeck and his wife paid a fine of 240 florins for wearing excessively long trains on their mourning gowns, which was considered extravagant and reserved for nobility. The Courts responded to these violations by issuing penalties.¹¹ Although riddled with fines, the merchant class continued their social aspirations, and by the seventeenth century, the Court's social barriers collapsed.¹² As this new social class developed, mourning fashion went through its own transition. Originally shapeless pieces with no ornamentation, these garments eventually adopted high fashion trends. Women's attitudes about mourning, rather than social etiquette, influenced the transformation of mourning attire.

During the fifteenth century, European women of noble blood were not only restricted to homes but also to their bedchambers during mourning periods. Draped in black from ceiling to floor, a woman's private rooms were a constant reminder of her grief. It was customary for her to remain in a "special" mourning bed. In this bed, a woman not only slept, but also received her condolence visits. In fifteenth century France, a woman remained confined to her bed for six weeks upon the death of her husband. Only permitted to leave her bed if a princess visited, the widow nevertheless

⁹ Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 26, 92.

¹⁰ Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 120.

¹¹ Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 92.

¹² Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 28.

needed to dress in her widow's garments. This isolation ritual remained well into the Victorian Era.¹³

Another practice that persisted into the Victorian Era was the donning of widow's weeds. Widow's weeds were the garments that women wore as a symbol of their widowhood. These garments originated in the first Christian convents, dating back to AD 410. During this period, it was common for grieving women to remove themselves completely from society by entering convents; some convents were even established by wealthy widows.¹⁴ This influenced the style of widow's attire and mannerism, which resembled a nun's garments and pious attitude.¹⁵ Both nuns and widows left their "worldly" ways, forsaking sexual activities and abandoning fashions of the day. In doing so, they created a new style of clothing. They achieved their objectives by wearing formless garments and veils. Widows sometimes wore old-fashioned clothing to display their rejection of current fashion trends. Even the color of the garments was similar. Dressed in black, grey, white, and brown, nuns wore these colors to symbolize their "chastity, humility, and purity," while widows wore black, grey and white to signify their "grief and rejection of joy."¹⁶ For several centuries, these garments survived somewhat unaltered; however, the widow's weeds ultimately surrendered to early modern fashion influences.¹⁷

During the fifteenth century, aristocratic women began to express their desire for less dowry clothing. Widows who wished to remarry wanted fashionable mourning

¹³ Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 53-54.

¹⁴ Some women entered convents to protect their inheritance while others wished not to remarry.

¹⁵ Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 79.

¹⁶ Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 66.

¹⁷ Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 60 - 66.

garments as their dowdy mourning garments warded off potential suitors.¹⁸ This began a long period of transition from the “draped, rectangular cut garments to more fitting and elaborate clothing.”¹⁹ By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, mourning attire was quite fashionable. The difference between non-mourning and mourning dresses was marginal. Mourning garments, while cut in the same style as everyday dresses, were made in dull or plain black fabric without ornamentation, such as lace, trimmings, or embroidered stomachers.²⁰ These trends ultimately reached Colonial America.

When the Puritans first settled in North America in 1622, they initially did not observe mourning customs. Funeral and burial practices were observed, but not as extravagantly as in England. Puritans believed in simplicity of dress. Puritan theology emphasized imminent death. Puritans believed that God already predetermined the saved and the damned, which would only be revealed on Judgment Day. Thus, Puritan communities expected simplicity and emotional restraint from mourners.²¹ Although there was no standardized mourning etiquette, most Puritans shied away from excessive displays. Robert Bolton, a Puritan clergyman, preached on the vanities of mourning. On the topic of dressing in black, Bolton claimed that this symbolism was an “artificial formes of sadness” and warned his clergy to “prevent that unseasonableness and excesse” in mourning nature. Furthermore, Puritan pastors never performed funeral sermons over a burial as they directed them towards the living and not the dead. With a lack of pomp and frivolity, mourners buried bodies within two to four days. There was no need for preservation methods for the corpses. This austerity in Puritan burials and funerals

¹⁸ Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 73.

¹⁹ Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 70.

²⁰ Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 106.

²¹ Yalom, *The American Resting Place*, 14-16.

prevailed for almost two decades in the New England colonies. But by the mid 1650s, Puritans had expanded their funeral practices to display more elaborate gestures towards their dead.²²

Non-Puritan colonists, however, immediately began preparing for their own burials and deaths. In seventeenth century Long Island, young men began collecting gold coins for their funeral expenses. In other communities, it was common for families to store casks of wine away at the birth of a child for either his wedding or funeral.²³ In certain colonial cities, the *aanspreecker*, or inviter, personally rode to everyone's house to invite individuals to a funeral. (Social norms deemed it improper to attend a funeral without an invitation.) This town crier came at a price. In 1731, New York passed a law mandating that "inviters to funerals" be paid eighteen shillings for the announcement of a funeral for someone over the age of twenty years, twelve shillings for those between twelve and twenty, and eight shillings for anyone under the age of twelve.²⁴

For some communities, a proper funeral was an extravagant affair even for the poor. In February 1700, Ryseck Swart, a New York Dutch widow passed away after transferring all of her possessions to her church. Upon her death, the church provided her a proper funeral. The funeral bill still survives:

	Guilders
3 dry boards for coffin	7
$\frac{3}{4}$ of a pound of nails	1
Charge for making coffin	24
Cartage	10
Half a vat and anker of good beer	27
1 gallon of rum	21

²² David E. Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death: A Study in Religion, Culture, and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 102-103, 110.

²³ Coffin, *Death in Early America*, 1, 73.

²⁴ Alice Morse Earle, "Death Ritual in Colonial New York," in *Passing: The Vision of Death in America*, ed. Charles O. Jackson (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997), 30-31.

6 gallons of Madeira for women and men	84
Sugar	5
150 sugar cakes	15
Tobacco and pipes	5
Use of pall	10
Wife Jans Lockermans	36 ²⁵

This desire for a proper funeral extended across the country.²⁶

Those who did not reside in a city were also aware of how they wanted their funeral and burial dictated. Many women kept their own burial clothes ready and handy for their chance at a “handsome funeral.” Once settled, the colonists continued to follow European mourning culture. Those settlers who could afford to import silk and crepe, did so in order to follow continental fashion trends. It was also very common for visitors at these funerals to receive small gifts or mementos commemorating the deceased. The traditional funeral gifts (especially among the new Dutch) were black gloves, handkerchiefs, rings, scarves, and “apostle spoons.” In 1736, when Mary Belcher, the wife of Massachusetts Governor Jonathan Belcher, died, over a thousand pairs of gloves were handed out to funeral guests. Andrew Eliot, a pastor of the Boston North Church, collected 2,940 gloves over a thirty-two year period.²⁷

Colonists became so consumed with the finery of the mourning fashions, that beginning in 1721 and extending past the Revolutionary War, Massachusetts created sumptuary laws ordering simpler funerals and mourning garments.²⁸ With the onset of the American Revolution, colonists encouraged one another to use local materials rather than importing cloths and mourning items. This essentially banned the importation of mortuary gifts, new mourning clothes for men, and liquor for the service. Those who

²⁵ Coffin, *Death in Early America*, 93.

²⁶ Coffin, *Death in Early America*, 93.

²⁷ Coffin, *Death in Early America*, 94.

²⁸ Coffin, *Death in Early America*, 94.

continued to engage in these funeral practices were heavily fined. The laws allowed women to purchase bonnets, fans, black ribbons, and gloves. However, within a few years after the Revolution, Americans immersed themselves once again in elaborate mourning traditions.²⁹

Beginning in the eighteenth century, the shifting perceptions of death further propelled the acceptance of elaborate mourning traditions. Originally perceived through physical and religious lenses, the act of life was considered “memento mori.”³⁰ Death was certain but salvation was not guaranteed.³¹ A frequent epitaph supporting this attitude was, “Where you are now, so once was I. Where I am, so you will be.”³² A tombstone often simply contained the name, birth date, and death date of the deceased in the absence of an epitaph. It was also common to inscribe on the tombstone cautionary illustrations for the living about their impending mortality. Skulls, death’s-heads, skeletons, hourglasses, coffins, scythes, and shovels were also common symbols for the seventeenth century.³³

Colonial diaries also reflected the objective approach to death. In 1736, a New England mother articulated the loss of her eight children between 1717 and 1737: “(S)o it pleased God to take away one after another of my dear children, I hope, to himself.” Despite their deep love for their children, parents understood that God had given them children and he could take them away at any time. Historians Nancy Dye and Daniel Smith explain this seemingly contradictory attitude as follows:

²⁹ Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 35; Coffin, *Death in Early America*, 94.

³⁰ There are several translations for the Latin phrase, “Memento Mori.” The three most common ones are, “remember your mortality,” “remember you must die,” and “remember you will die.”

³¹ Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, 125.

³² Kenneth T. Jackson and Camilo José Vergara, *Silent Cities: The Evolution of the American Cemetery* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1989), 10.

³³ Yalom, *The American Resting Place*, 14-16.

It is one of the paradoxes of colonial family life that parents cared deeply for their children and yet expected neither conscientious care nor the best medical attention to cure their children's illnesses, prevent dangerous accidents, or forestall death. Children were God's temporary gift to parents; what He had freely given, He could just as freely-and suddenly-take away.³⁴

Sometimes women's diaries lacked any emotion at all when noting a toddler's or infant's death. When Mary Vial Holyoke bore and lost a daughter in a span of five days in September 1767, she wrote in her diary a generic description of the baby's death. On September 9th she wrote, "It died about 8 o'clock in the morning." The next entry reads "Sept. 10. Was buried."³⁵

During the First Great Awakening, attitudes about death transitioned again. Shifting from an emphasis on morbidity and damnation, death began reflecting the possibility of salvation and sentimental longing.³⁶ Marilyn Yalom, author of *The American Resting Place*, believes this change resulted from the religious revival movement; death transitioned from morbidity to a "joyful resurrection."³⁷ It was also during this time that American values about womanhood began to change. Women's responsibilities included nurturing and providing moral support for their children. Women began to develop strong maternal affections for their children especially at the turn of the nineteenth century. With middle-class white women confined to their homes, women's maternal bond began to develop a deeper emotion for privacy and a need for immediate family. Parents began to show this emotion and new form of love toward their children. The most ideal mother would be a woman who could place her responsibility as

³⁴ Nancy Shrom Dye and Daniel Blake Smith, "Mother Love and Infant Death, 1750-1920," *The Journal of American History* 73, no. 2 (September 1986): 136-137. <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.unl.edu/stable/1908225> (accessed May 5, 2012).

³⁵ Dye, "Mother Love and Infant Death," 334.

³⁶ Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, 125.

³⁷ Yalom, *The American Resting Place*, 14-16.

a mother above everything else. If she was able, she would hire staff to take care of her household chores.³⁸ According to Nancy Shrom Dye and Daniel Blake Smith, Louise Park's diary, in particular, represents these changing attitudes.

While Park's diary practice was commonplace in the early 1800s, her writings reflect a strong maternal bond to her young son, Warren, an attitude not readily expressed during this era. Park filled her diary with daily accounts of her activities with Warren. From playing with him to nursing him, Park's responsibilities revolved around her son. She even expressed a great concern for Warren during the 1801 January influenza epidemic, even though he was not sick. She wrote, "I hope Warren is not going to be sick. I begin to love him much." However by March, Warren had fallen gravely ill and died on April 25, 1801. Park's diary discloses her grief and loss:

Until today, I found it impossible to compose myself sufficiently to make the attempt [to write]. At bedtime, instead of my charming boy, my lovely babe...instead of my laughing cherub to receive the caress of a tender mother – I found a lifeless corps – laid out in the white robes of innocence and death. Though I wept and pressed him, he could not look at me. How could I endure it – much less compose myself – but by believing him gone to perfect rest and happiness – there to wait for his father and mother.³⁹

Park's response to her young son's death reveals her personal acceptance of intense maternal grief at the loss of a child.⁴⁰ This affection appears to have been widespread in the early American Republic as further documented within mortuary portraits and photographs.

³⁸ Dana Luciano, *Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 121.

³⁹ Louise Park, January 29, May 2, May 4, 1801, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA, quoted in Nancy Shrom Dye and Daniel Blake Smith, "Mother Love, Infant Death, 1750-1920" *The Journal of American History* 73, no. 2 (September 1986). <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.unl.edu/stable/1908225> (accessed May 5, 2012).

⁴⁰ Dye, "Mother Love and Infant Death," 332.

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth-century America, prominent families continued the art of mortuary portraits that was practiced in Europe. Although almost exclusive to wealthy families, middle class families and eventually wage earners adopted this cultural tradition through postmortem photography. In 1776, Charles Willson Peale, a member of the famous Philadelphia family of artists, released his mortuary painting, *Rachel Weeping*, to the public (See Figure 1). Originally intended as a private memento, Peale's wife commissioned the painting after the death of their young daughter. Initially, the image was only of the daughter but with its release to the public, Peale enlarged the picture and included his grieving wife, Rachel. This imagery of a deceased child with the bereaved parent remained popular well into the nineteenth century.⁴¹



Figure 1. Charles Willson Peale's *Rachel Weeping*, Philadelphia Museum of Art, <http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/71982.html>

⁴¹ Ruby, *Secure the Shadow*, 31-33.

During the nineteenth century, the posthumous painting, the art of portraying the deceased as alive, became a genre in and of itself. While mortuary paintings captured the last images of the departed, posthumous paintings transformed the dead into a living being via portraiture. Artists fashioned these portraits to expose the thin line between life and death. To achieve their objective, artists had two illustrative options. The first involved painting the deceased in his or her former environment, while the other required the artist to utilize identifiable or hidden death symbols within the deceased's portrait. An example of the former is the portrait of Sarah Louisa Spence by Ralph E.W. Earle.⁴²

In 1832, nine-year-old Sarah Louisa Spence succumbed to cholera overnight. Devastated, her parents immediately commissioned Earle to create a posthumous pictorial of Sarah. Earle painted an exact likeness of Sarah using meticulous detail. Taking measurements of the corpse, he created a life-size portrait and using a lock of her hair, he matched her hair color. He also posed Sarah's half-sister to recreate Sarah's eyes, since the sisters shared the same hazel eye color. Finally, using a portrait of five-year-old Sarah and her mother, Earle rendered a "likeness portrait" of Sarah.⁴³ Today, Sarah's portrait still survives in Sotheby Parke Bernet, located in New York, New York. Dressed in clothes from her era, Sarah greets her viewer with a slight smile. The only evidence of her death is the rose she holds. Held upside down, the rose symbolizes the loss of an innocent life. Transfixed in time, Sarah represents the delicate balance between life and death (See Figure 2).⁴⁴

⁴² Pike, *A Time to Mourn*, 70-73.

⁴³ Pike, *A Time to Mourn*, 73.

⁴⁴ Pike, *A Time to Mourn*, 73.



Figure 2. Ralph Earle’s *Sarah Louise Spence*, a post-mortem painting.⁴⁵

The sentimental natures of both paintings and diaries point to the growth of “the cult of mourning,” and by the mid nineteenth century this subculture was fully ingrained within American custom. Sentimentalists of this mourning culture believed that bereavement and sympathy were the two “deepest” human emotions. These two emotions signified an individual’s social benevolence, Christian piety and sincere sensibility. Those who participated in this mourning culture believed that it was the purest and most transparent behavior in American society. The ability to engage and indulge in the mourning experience allowed individuals to exhibit genteel behavior and class. The facility to follow and engage in strict dress and mourning etiquette allowed middle-class

⁴⁵ Pike, *A Time to Mourn*, 70.

and upper to middle-class citizens to publicly declare their social status, and genteel women were the performers of this new phenomenon.⁴⁶

Women, particularly, had strict guidelines and standards to follow when it came to mourning. Considered the “true vessels of grief,” they faced public disgrace if they did not adhere to these guidelines.⁴⁷ Many women sought clarification and advice from magazines on proper mourning etiquette and dress.⁴⁸ This aided in the development of the woman’s magazine as women demanded more advice.⁴⁹ Such information was needed because women would spend years mourning the loss of their friends, family and loved ones. Even though women did not profit from this burgeoning segment of the fashion world, they helped generate the economy behind it. Women had to deal with purchasing or making the necessary garments for every stage of mourning, making the process quite expensive.

As more women participated in the “the cult of mourning” the demand for mourning clothing spurred a fashion craze. Many women simply turned their dresses into mourning garments using dye while others special ordered specific mourning garments. Unlike most clothes, women need mourning clothing very quickly and thus, mourning clothes became the first off-the-rack clothing that could be purchased in stores.⁵⁰ Companies soon started to respond to this demand by instilling mourning clothing departments within their stores. In many of the larger cities, stores began to develop specialty shops that completely catered to those in mourning and bereavement, while

⁴⁶ Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, 124, 139.

⁴⁷ DeLorme, *Mourning Art and Jewelry*, 51.

⁴⁸ John Morley, *Death, Heaven and the Victorians* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1971), 67.

⁴⁹ Mary Brett, *Fashionable Mourning Jewelry, Clothing, & Customs* (Atglen, Pennsylvania: Schiffer Publishing Ltd, 2006), 86.

⁵⁰ Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 192-193.

other stores carried complete fashions lines.⁵¹ In April 1863, New York's Lord & Taylor opened its own mourning department. In Philadelphia, Besson & Son, a mourning store, advertised Black Crepe Grenadines, Black Balzerines, Black Baryadere Bargeges, Black Beres, and other mourning accessories.⁵² To help facilitate sales, mourning clothing manufacturers even began a rumor in both the United States and Great Britain that it was unlucky to keep mourning attire after one successfully completed all stages of mourning.⁵³ One woman spent \$500 on her mourning trousseau in 1864. Dismayed, the women lamented that before the war she would not have considered this "fit for a chambermaid."⁵⁴ By the 1880s, stores were advertising their mourning wares. A store in New York City, Jackson's, advertised their merchandise: "there is nothing that a lady in mourning can desire that is not to be found at this old and well-known store."⁵⁵ The idea of wholesale garments soon quickly grew with the use of sewing machines and mail order catalogs. The ability for a woman to simply order a dress or buy clothing off-the-rack created a strong consumer market. It further allowed all levels of society access to participate in the previously genteel mourning culture.⁵⁶ As women fully engaged in the consumption of mourning clothing, they followed a strict mourning protocol.

When a woman lost her husband, she entered into the longest period of mourning. Regardless of the nature of the marriage or the man, society required her to show respect

⁵¹ John Samuel Stephenson, *Death, Grief, and Mourning: Individual and Social Realities* (New York: The Free Press, 1985), 206.

⁵² Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 152.

⁵³ Pat Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 301.

⁵⁴ Mary Boykin Miller Chestnut, March 1864, *A Diary from Dixie*, ed. Isabella D. Martin and Myrta L. Avery. (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1995), 293-301.

⁵⁵ "To Suit All Pocketbooks," *New York Times*, April 18, 1888.

⁵⁶ Valerie Steele, *The Berg Companion to Fashion* (New York: Oxford, 2010), 518-519, Google Books, http://books.google.com/books?id=Hemsvn9ZbRkC&pg=PA520&dq=mourning+fashion+in+stores&hl=en&sa=X&ei=xuisT_jQBY_g8ASU8PHxDA&ved=0CFUQ6AEwAw#v=onepage&q=mourning%20fashion%20in%20stores&f=false (accessed May 5, 2012).

by entering into a two-year mourning period. The first stage of mourning for a widow was heavy mourning (See Figure 3). For the first six months, a widow dressed in garments made of dull black crepe or Henrietta cloth covered with crepe attached by mourning pins. If a woman could not afford to buy a mourning dress, she dyed an old dress or borrowed one from a friend. These dresses lacked decoration and were completely black. On her head, she wore a crepe bonnet with a veil or a white widow's cap. This veil covered the length of her body. If a woman entered into public, mourning etiquette required her to cover her face with the veil.



Figure 3: A widow in heavy mourning. c. 1860-1870.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Pike, *A Time to Mourn*, 96.

Yet, it was proper etiquette for a widow to remain at home for the first months, if possible. Receiving visits from close friends and/or family, a widow only left her home to attend church.⁵⁸

After the first six months, a widow entered into first mourning or full mourning (See Figure 4). She exchanged her veil for a lighter one, and a widow's cap could be left off, if she chose. In this stage, dresses were trimmed with white crepe collars and cuffs. Women who wore Henrietta dresses removed the black crepe for either grenadine or copeau fringe.⁵⁹



Figure 4: A widow in first mourning. c. 1870s.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Pike, *A Time to Mourn*, 101.

⁵⁹ Mary Brett, *Fashionable Mourning Jewelry, Clothing, & Customs* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Pub, 2006), 87.

⁶⁰ Brett, *Fashionable Mourning Jewelry, Clothing & Customs*, 94.

Once the first year of mourning ended, the widow entered into second mourning of the half mourning stage. The widow's weeds transitioned twice during this period. The first half of the year, the widow continued to wear the dull black crepe, but removed any unnecessary heavy crepe (See Figure 5).



Figure 5: A widow in the first phase of second mourning.⁶¹

Embellishments of white crepe around the neck and sleeves and simple jet black adornments were acceptable. Women could remove the face veil and decorate bonnets with ribbon and crepe. After the first six months, a woman exchanged her widow's weeds for less somber clothing. Donned in purple, mauve, and grey garments and without the decoration of crepe, a widow slowly resumed her social life (Figure 6).

⁶¹ Brett, *Fashionable Mourning Jewelry, Clothing & Customs*, 94.



Figure 6: A widow in the second phase of second mourning.⁶²

Society expected a widow to delay her reentrance for a few days after the anniversary of her husband's death before resuming social activities.⁶³

Besides mourning the loss of her husband, a woman mourned the deaths of other relatives. Each relation had a designated mourning period: one year for a parent, nine months to a year for a child, six months to a year for a sibling, and six months for other relatives including spousal relations.⁶⁴ No matter how close her relationship with the deceased, a woman was not to mourn another person longer than she mourned the death of her husband. Each death also had specific mourning dress. If a woman's parent died, she wore garments made of Henrietta material trimmed with crepe and black tulle on the collar and cuffs. For the latter part of the period, she exchanged the black for white tulle.

⁶² Brett, *Fashionable Mourning Jewelry, Clothing & Customs*, 94.

⁶³ DeLorme, *Mourning Art & Jewelry*, 53.

⁶⁴ DeLorme, *Mourning Art & Jewelry*, 54.

In the beginning of this mourning duration, she wore a bonnet with a veil, but did not cover her face with it.⁶⁵

Although a woman mourned the loss of her child and her parents for equal time periods, she was urged to shed her mourning garments as soon as possible because her husband needed “a more cheerful matriarch for his remaining children and a brighter partner for himself.”⁶⁶ Therefore, she only donned black crepe for three months and then shifted into second mourning fashions. With respect to the mourning garments for other relations, a woman’s guidelines became more elaborate. If mentioned in a distant relative or friend’s will, she was required to mourn them for six months.⁶⁷ If she married a widower, she grieved the death of his first wife’s parents for three months and the deceased wife’s siblings for two months while fashioning herself in half mourning.⁶⁸

Even when attending a happy celebration, such as a wedding, etiquette demanded that a woman don her mourning garments. A woman in mourning in attendance at a wedding avoided the wedding couple because it was considered bad luck if the couple saw a grieving individual. On rare occasions when a woman remarried during the mourning of her first husband, she wore bridal attire either in muted colors or in grey. After the wedding, she resumed her mourning for her first husband. For the death of a parent, a woman followed the same guidelines (Figure 7).⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Brett, *Fashionable Mourning Jewelry, Clothing, & Customs*, 87.

⁶⁶ Brett, *Fashionable Mourning Jewelry, Clothing, & Customs*, 86.

⁶⁷ Brett, *Fashionable Mourning Jewelry, Clothing, & Customs*, 87.

⁶⁸ Morley, *Death, Heaven and the Victorians*, 69.

⁶⁹ Brett, *Fashionable Mourning Jewelry, Clothing, & Customs*, 100.



Figure 7: Mrs. Reihnold on her wedding day wearing mourning attire. C. 1890.⁷⁰

In addition to the strict etiquette guidelines, women experienced severe repercussions and tribulations from the dye used in their mourning clothing. If the dress was not store bought, many women had to dye their own clothing. The dye used to color mourning garments stained a woman's skin, while emitting an unpleasant odor because of a mix of copperas, logwood, and valonia.⁷¹ When David Copperfield's mother died after childbirth, Copperfield visited the local undertaker to be fitted for his mourning garments. Copperfield described the smell as breathless.⁷² During the Civil War, many women dyed their clothing in large cauldrons outside because of the smell. It was also recorded that a town would reek of black dye as women mourned the loss of their men during the war. A Virginian woman's diary in 1864 mentions "the entire town smells of

⁷⁰ Brett, *Fashionable Mourning Jewelry, Clothing, & Customs*, 103.

⁷¹ Brett, *Fashionable Mourning Jewelry, Clothing, & Customs*, 86.

⁷² Taylor, *The Study of Dress History* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2002), 110.

dyepots.”⁷³ The dye used also caused further distress to mourning women when it was warm outside or raining.

On hot days, a woman’s skin would be blackened by the dye that was not easily removed by water or soap. The only remedy was an equal mixture of oxalic acid and cream of tartar. If a woman was caught in the rain, it was disastrous. Crepe easily stained in water. A woman had the meticulous task of repairing the white water spots.

To obliterate it, ‘place underneath the stain a piece of old black silk. With a camel’s hair brush dipped in common ink go over the stain; wipe off the ink with a little bit of old soft silk. It will dry immediately and the white mark will be seen no more.’⁷⁴

Another uncomfortable accessory for a woman was the veil. Being heavy, veils made turning one’s head almost impossible and the veil often caught on the dress.⁷⁵ These veils sometimes became a danger to women, spreading a “pernicious dye” onto a woman’s face. When mingled with tears, the dye caused eye infections and at worst, blindness.⁷⁶ In the *Harper Bazaar* 1865 article, “Mourning and Funeral Usages” the author addresses this health hazard. The author states that many doctors advised against wearing the veil, but because fashion dictated that the accessory be worn, women chose to follow etiquette. “It is the very banner of woe, and no one has the courage to go without it.” The author then offers an alternative that women place a piece of tulle over their eyes and nose and remove the veil from the face when possible.⁷⁷ Despite these hazards, wearing mourning garments provided women some positive options. Eventually

⁷³ Kent Historical Society, “2008 Exhibit –Pulling Kent Out of the Closet Discovering Our Hidden Treasures,” *Kent Historical Society*, <http://www.kenthistoricalsociety.org/2008-exhibits.htm> (accessed August 17, 2012).

⁷⁴ Morley, *Death, Heaven and the Victorians*, 65.

⁷⁵ Morley, *Death, Heaven and the Victorians*, 68.

⁷⁶ Bettina Bradbury, *Wife to Widow: Lives, Laws, and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Montreal* (UBC Press, 2012), 209.

⁷⁷ “Mourning and Funeral Usages”, April 17, 1886 [electronic edition]. *Harper's Bazaar, Nineteenth Century Fashion Magazine*, <http://harpersbazaar.victorian-ebooks.com> (2005).

it gave women the luxury of purchasing off-the rack clothing and a selection of magazines for fashion and advice. Garment industries also produced better garment material and new fashions for woman. Furthermore, mourning garments provided a refuge. Behind a veil, a woman could block out the world while openly and publicly grieving.⁷⁸

A woman's ability to fully participate in the proper stages of bereavement through her clothing and demeanor revealed her breeding and an exceptional character, according to society.⁷⁹ To guide women in their expected mourning roles, the publication of *Godey's Lady's Book* or *Godey's Magazine and Lady's Book*, in 1840, under the direction of Sarah Josepha Hale, offered women articles and fashion advice that adhered to genteel culture. As the most popular women's periodical at the time, *Godey's Lady's Book* indulged women's consumerism and appetite for advice on mourning etiquette and fashion.⁸⁰ According to Karen Halttunen, author of *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870*, this display of excessive immersion in mourning fashion and proper sentimental expression, symbolized the aspiration of the middle-class to retain class distinction.⁸¹ As the faces of grief, women performed her family's wealth through her demeanor and dress.⁸²

Women were not the only individuals who donned mourning clothing. Men and children, even servants, dressed in bereavement attire. However, society did not restrict men as much in bereavement protocol. Men's attire was relatively simple compared to

⁷⁸ DeLorme, *Mourning Art & Jewelry*, 53.

⁷⁹ Bernadette Loeffel Atkins, *Widow's Weeds & Weeping Veils: Mourning Rituals in 19th Century America* (Gettysburg, PA.: B.L. Atkins, 2002), 20.

⁸⁰ Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 152.

⁸¹ Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, 64.

⁸² Ann Schofield, "The Fashion of Mourning," in *Representations of Death in Nineteenth-Century US Writing and Culture*, ed. Lucy E. Frank (Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate Pub, 2007), 162.

the women's intricate fashions. Wearing their finest black suits, men relinquished any coloring in their attire and wore a visible crepe band around the hat. They also could wear mourning silks, cufflinks and ties. The crepe band's width on the hat signified the relationship to the deceased; the wider the band, the closer the relationship.⁸³ Another option denoting a man's mourning status was a crepe band placed around the arm of a jacket (Figure 8).



Figure 8: A young boy wearing traditional male mourning attire. C. 1860s.⁸⁴

Society only approved of this custom if a man's daily clothing was an unalterable ensemble such as a uniform.

Unlike women, men only publicly mourned for immediate family for approximately three months to a year, and society did not expect them to retire fully from

⁸³ Brett, *Fashionable Mourning Jewelry, Clothing, & Customs*, 86.

⁸⁴ Brett, *Fashionable Mourning Jewelry, Clothing, & Customs*, 22.

society.⁸⁵ Etiquette manuals recommended that men of high standing within society mourn according to aristocratic standards. When men lost their spouses, society encouraged them to remarry as soon as possible especially if they had children. Many men proved unprepared to take care of their own children and quickly sought new, and many times much younger, wives. However, if a widower moved too quickly into another marriage, his family or his wife's family could reprimand or oust him, despite society's rules and dictations.⁸⁶ Mary Todd Lincoln's family history is illustrative of this point.

When Mary Todd Lincoln was six years old, her mother died from complications of her seventh child's birth. Within a week of his first wife's death, Mary's father, Robert Todd, began to look for a new wife to help him with his seven children. He proposed six months later to Elizabeth Humphreys after courting her in Frankfurt, Germany. They were married a year and a half later. Although he had followed mourning customs and rules and waited almost two years before he remarried, his first wife's family, the Parkers, did not take Robert's remarriage kindly. Neither the Parkers nor the Todds attended Robert's second wedding.⁸⁷

If a father could not take care of his children and did not immediately remarry, he may have sent his children to relatives or placed them in an orphanage.⁸⁸ When Abraham Lincoln's mother passed away on October 5, 1818, Lincoln and his family lived in disorder and squalor. Attempting to maintain control of the family, Abraham's twelve-year-old sister, Sarah, took charge of the household's duties; however, the children still

⁸⁵ Habenstein, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, 414; Pike, *A Time to Mourn*, 101.

⁸⁶ Brett, *Fashionable Mourning Jewelry, Clothing, & Customs*, 87; Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, 14; Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, 252.

⁸⁷ *Abraham and Mary Lincoln: A House Divided*, VHS, directed by David Grubin (Alexandria, VA: PBS Home Video, 2001); Kenneth J. Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011), 11-12.

⁸⁸ Brett, *Fashionable Mourning Jewelry, Clothing, & Customs*, 87.

ran around “wild, ragged, and dirty.” Lincoln’s father quickly realized that his children needed the guidance of a mother. Placing his children in the care of a cousin, he left for six months to seek a new bride. Only upon his return with his new wife, Sarah Bush Johnston, did Thomas Lincoln’s family regain order and control.⁸⁹

The disparity between men and women’s expected mourning performances demonstrates the limited expectations imposed on men. In a society controlled and dominated by men, the act of mourning and grief was largely relegated to women.⁹⁰ Although women followed stricter mourning guidelines, men enjoyed relative mourning “freedom”. The encouragement for widowers to quickly remarry exemplifies society’s expectation for men to quickly regain normalcy in their lives following the death of their wives. It was further expected that upon a second marriage, the husband would find solace with his new wife.⁹¹ It was common for men to return to work within a week to four weeks after their bereavement. These attitudes further reveal that although women immersed themselves in their grief for years, men suppressed and restrained their grief following the death of a loved one.⁹²

While their fathers and mothers mourned differently, children followed their own unique guidelines. Although not as intricate as theirs mothers or as relaxed as their fathers, they still adhered to required fashion and etiquette. Originally, children’s mourning garments and attire were miniature replicas of adults’ bereavement clothing. Even nurseries were draped in mourning decoration; for example, crib sheets would be

⁸⁹ *Abraham and Mary Lincoln: A House Divided*, VHS, directed by David Grubin (2001; Alexandria, Va: PBS Home Video, 2001); Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, 13-14; C. A. Tripp, *The Intimate World of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Lewis Gannett (New York: Free Press, 2005), 25.

⁹⁰ Faust, *This Republic Of Suffering*, 148.

⁹¹ Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, 252.

⁹² Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, 264.

laced with black thread.⁹³ Not until the 1800's did children's fashion change as society began to recognize children as having their own culture. Children's clothing became less restrictive and more comfortable, allowing children to move and play more easily. This influenced children's mourning dress during the late nineteenth century.⁹⁴

The age of the child determined the colors he or she would wear in mourning. Young infants wore white dresses with either black soutache braids or black ribbons throughout the dress. If an infant's mother died during childbirth, the child was required to dress in all black for his or her first photograph. Underneath the black outfit, social etiquette permitted the child to wear white undergarments as the black dye stained the skin (See Figure 9).



Figure 9: A young child in mourning for the death of his or her mother from childbirth. c. 1860s.⁹⁵

⁹³ DeLorme, *Mourning Art & Jewelry*, 55.

⁹⁴ Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 174.

⁹⁵ DeLorme, *Fashionable Mourning Jewelry, Clothing, & Customs*, 50.

Older children dressed in white during the summer and grey in the winter. Their outfits trimmed with black adornments such as black ribbons, buttons, belts and pins.⁹⁶ Other children, specifically girls of wealthy families, still wore replicas of their parent's mourning attire.



Figure 10: A young girl dressed in mourning attire. c. 1860s.⁹⁷

By the 1880s, people began to criticize mourning garments for children. In Fannie Fern's book, *Ginger Snaps*, she openly condemns society for the practice: "Is it Christian or even humane, so to surround them [children] with gloom that 'death' shall be a never-ceasing nightmare?" She further denounces the practice by claiming it is a "bugaboo

⁹⁶ Brett, *Fashionable Mourning Jewelry, Clothing, & Customs*, 87.

⁹⁷ Brett, *Fashionable Mourning Jewelry, Clothing, & Customs*, 50.

nightmare” of “heathenish insignia.”⁹⁸ Another author, Sylvia,⁹⁹ believed children should be released from the cumbersome practice of mourning:

It is desirable that children should be put into mourning dress as seldom as possible; only in fact for the nearest relatives. The little children do not understand it and it is absurd to invest them with signs of grief they cannot feel. Absence of a positive colour is quite sufficient mourning for children.¹⁰⁰

Children eventually enjoyed the relaxation in adult mourning dress and etiquette.

However, it would take another fifty years for an official relaxation in women’s mourning dress to commence.¹⁰¹

In addition to guidelines for mourning fashion, people also followed strict guidelines for mourning correspondence. When communicating through writing, an individual used specific stationary, decorated with black borders, to indicate their mourning status. These borders also signified the author’s phase of mourning by its width; the thicker the band, the deeper the mourning stage. It was also advised that people refrain from using colored crests, perfume and decorative handwriting.¹⁰² Families used this stationary to notify distant relatives and friends of a death.¹⁰³

Even if not in mourning, a person abided by explicit guidelines when writing a sympathy letter. Depending on the loss, sympathy letters required specific terminology.

Manuals dictated this precise terminology through letter templates:

Pemberton, Miss., Nov. 18, 18—

My Dear Friend:

I realize that this letter will find you buried in the deepest sorrow at the loss of your darling little Emma, and that words of mine will

⁹⁸ Fannie Fern, *Ginger Snaps* (New York: S. Lows, 1870), 43.

⁹⁹ This individual is only known by her first name.

¹⁰⁰ Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 181.

¹⁰¹ Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 181.

¹⁰² Habenstein, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, 415.

¹⁰³ Brett, *Fashionable Mourning Jewelry, Clothing, & Customs*, 80.

be entirely inadequate to assuage your overwhelming grief; yet I feel that I must write a few words to assure that I am thinking of you and praying for you.

If there can be compensating thought, it is that your darling returned to the God who gave it, pure and unspotted by the world's temptations.

The white rose and bud, I send, I trust you will permit to rest upon your darling's pillow.

With feelings of the deepest sympathy, I remain, dear friend.

Yours, Very Sincerely.¹⁰⁴

Another form of communication between mourners and society was the calling card. Edged in black, like stationary, calling cards declared the mourner's relationship to the deceased; the wider the black edge, the closer in relationship; the thinner, the more distant the relationship.¹⁰⁵ The calling card itself signified the signs of gentility and the need for privacy. No longer surrounded by a community of friends during her time of grief, a woman was expected to withdraw from the world for a certain period. Her close friends would only call upon her only *after* she left deep mourning or until they received a black-lined letter.¹⁰⁶

Conclusion

Through their expression of mourning etiquette and dress, middle-class women indulged in a death culture considered suitable and appropriate to their standing in society. It was their responsibility to outwardly and properly perform their grief and sympathy. Following regulated strict mourning restrictions and protocol, women carried the emotional economics of bereavement through their indulgence and consumption of mourning clothing, while prominently performing and ritualizing grief. By the turn of the

¹⁰⁴ Brett, *Fashionable Mourning Jewelry, Clothing, & Customs*, 80.

¹⁰⁵ Habentein, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, 415.

¹⁰⁶ Pike, *A Time to Mourn*, 101.

century, the demand for woman's elaborate rituals of grief began disintegrating and eventually collapsed with the beginning of World War I. The role of the weeping woman became a passing memory of societal melancholia.

CONCLUSION

“Every other woman you meet is in deep mourning, veils, etc...very few wear mourning and then the simplest black, no crepe veils seen, of course to my way of thinking the only sensible thing.”¹

On July 28, 1914, World War I began. As the war in Europe raged, it would take another three years before the United States joined the fight in 1917. While thousands of Americans died overseas, it became impossible for families to provide funerals for fallen soldiers, much less, perform the elaborate funerary rituals as they had in the past. Grappling with this catastrophic loss of life, the people of the United States abandoned established mourning etiquette. Determined to display patriotic support for the war, the country shunned the materialistic nature of Victorian mourning rituals in hopes of maintaining a positive morale on the home front. Furthermore, if a person died on the home front, it was considered unpatriotic to have an extravagant funeral for him or her, while so many soldiers who died on the battlefield could not be buried in a similar fashion. Families learned to mourn the loss of brothers, husbands, sons, and friends behind closed doors. The once revered and mandated mourning guidelines and funerary etiquette, that shaped nineteenth century middle-class women’s identity in the culture of death, became obsolete.²

The examination of this fascinating history of women’s roles in death culture and mourning etiquette offers a larger insight into the changing landscape of American women’s history. Historian Erik R. Seeman argues that to fully understand the history of

¹ Elizabeth H. Ashe, Letter from Elizabeth H. Ashe, August 13, 1917, in *Intimate Letters from France, and Extracts from the Diary of Elizabeth Ashe, rev. and enl.* (San Francisco, CA: Philopolis Press, 1918), pp. 18-19.

² Suzanne Evans, *Mothers of Heroes, Mothers of Martyrs: World War I and the Politics of Grief* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007), 8; Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death*, 144; Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, 373.

a civilization, the examination of a society's death and burial practices is necessary. Every culture experiences death and dying. How a culture honors its dead, expresses grief, and performs its burials reflects the arrangement and inner workings of its society.³ This examination of women's everyday life in relation to the shifting death culture from the colonial period to the late nineteenth century reveals how women initially controlled the practices surrounding death and burial, but eventually lost control of those rituals with the emergence of funeral directors.

The assessment of gender in direct correlation with the culture of death is significant. In the limited scope of research that examines the history of death practices and rituals, the two primary subjects that are routinely examined are the development of the funeral industry and women's elaborate mourning rituals. However, rarely are they examined together. As has been demonstrated, one cannot fully understand the history and significance of each cultural phenomenon without the other.

In early colonial history, women prepared the dead, not only because it fell within their "feminine" domain, but because their communities required it. Communities relied on all of its members, including women, to "do their part" but to work collaboratively to maintain order and generate prosperity. This facilitated the formation of a community of women who prepared the dead. Transferring their knowledge from grandmother to mother, mother to daughter, women ensured their roles as "shrouders" and "layers out of the dead" survived within their communities. Preparation of the deceased was an individual task, but one shared with a community of women. Martha Ballard's diary supports this claim, as she relied on the women of her community to help with midwifery

³ Erik R. Seeman, *Death in the New World: Cross-Cultural Encounters, 1492-1800* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 1-2.

services. However, she, herself extended her assistance where help was needed.

Essentially, in the colonies death was a communal event.

This female network that performed and controlled death rituals disintegrated with the changing ideology about women's proper place in society concomitant with the rise of the new republic. Relegated to the home, women refocused their responsibilities to revolve around their households and families. Elizabeth Drinker's life was symbolic of this new republican woman. She concentrated her life around her family, and when she did go out into society, she appeared to feel very little obligation to participate in events with her larger community. This included engaging in preparing the dead for mourning and burial. Only once did Drinker assist a family in the loss of the deceased one and promptly left when other friends and family relieved her.

While we cannot use the lives of two women—Ballard and Drinker—to generalize about all women's roles in preparing, mourning, and burying the dead, our sources from the period point to the defeminization of death culture in the nineteenth century. The Industrial Revolution further perpetrated the growing chasm between women and the trades and duties they held in the colonial period. With the removal of women from economic positions, undertakers sensed a capitalistic opportunity within the death trade. Although, they still provided the service of "preparing the dead", undertakers consolidated multiple trades related to death and dying into one profession, arguing that their methods were scientific. From the preparation of the deceased for burial to conducting and holding funeral services within their own business walls, undertakers eventually became known as funeral directors. The undertaker/funeral director's argument that their scientific knowledge of the body made them uniquely qualified for

preparing the dead was not unique during this era. Other science-based professionalization movements co-opted female knowledge and displaced women from certain trades. Doctors ousted midwives and healers from the medical practice utilizing the same rhetoric of the undertaker. Determined to be recognized as a valid and respectable practitioner, funeral directors professionalized and masculinized the death trade.

Divested of their roles as shrouders and layers out of the dead, women began constructing new elaborate and strict mourning guidelines for themselves that gave them some sense of autonomy. Utilizing centuries old mourning fashions and gaining inspiration from Queen Victoria and Mary Todd Lincoln, women created a consumer market completely devoted to a sub-culture surrounding death, fashionably known as the “cult of mourning.” Women who fully engaged and participated in these practices were ideal women. Middle-class women wore their mourning garments as a badge of honor. The ability to partake in extensive mourning rituals and spend lavishly on a mourning wardrobe signified a woman’s status in society, as well as her privilege to mourn the loss of loved ones indefinitely. Interestingly, it took a war (the Civil War) to initiate the mourning fashion “craze” and another war (the Great War) to reshape it.

From the colonial era to the late nineteenth century, families across the United States transitioned their way of life to reflect the changing political, economic, and social landscape. With each transition, women’s culture or ‘way of life’ was altered, and accordingly, so was the culture of death. However, in every decade, women adhered to established death rituals and practices. By controlling the processes for preparing bodies for visitation, and burial, to following elaborate mourning guidelines, death became them.

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