

Gender and Division of Labor Associated with Dying, Burial, and Mourning in Early America

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A death notice for Elizabeth Drinker, from December 2, 1807 described the Quaker matron as, a “...lady whose sweetness of disposition and singular propriety of conduct, endeared her through life to all who had the happiness of knowing her.” Drinker kept a diary from the time of her marriage to Henry Drinker in 1761

¹ to the “evening preceding her final illness...”² chronicling life in Philadelphia during the late years of the colonies and early years of the Republic. Diaries such as those left by Drinker and other women provide a feminine perspective of daily life-including rituals associated with death in the late colonial period and early years of the Republic. By examining gendered divisions of labor associated with death and dying among Protestants in early America, women frequently reappear in the narrative assuming roles that were an extension of activities associated with those of the home. Some volunteered their services, whereas others were paid for their services. Members of communities depended on one another through a system of mutual aid in times of loss and rendered aid based on prescribed gendered norms and gendered divisions of labor.

Prior to the development of the funeral industry in the latter half of the nineteenth century, members of the local community were involved in death and burial rituals, with a division of labor that reflected the roles of women and men in society³. During the colonial period, and the years of the new republic, death most frequently occurred in the home. Members of communities engaged in a system of mutual aid by helping families at a time of loss. Women cared for the sick and dying and prepared the body for burial.⁴ Men built coffins, as an extension of the cabinet making trade. The local sexton dug the grave. On the day of the funeral, men transported the coffin to the burial site. Women participated in the funeral service by providing hospitality to mourners and taking part in the procession. Women and men participated in mourning rituals by donning attire and following mourning etiquette based on religion and social status. These gendered divisions of labor and social expectations represented the specified gender roles within colonial society. Although the rituals associated with death and dying particularly in functions outside the home were dominated by men, women still carved out their own place in these rituals based on gender roles of the time.

Care for the Sick and Dying – Herbalists, Midwives and Layers out of the Dead

Women in colonial America cared for the sick, treated basic illnesses, served as midwives, cared for the dying, and prepared the dead for burial as an extension of caring for home and family. In many rural areas women provided most of the medical care. Part of the role of the housewife was to make basic remedies and keep watch over ill family members and children. Some excelled in their role as herbalists or midwives and used

¹ Find A Grave, “Elizabeth Sandwith Drinker”, findagrave.com, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/149000659/elizabeth-drinker> (accessed February 28, 2019).

² Death Notice , Elizabeth Drinker, *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) vol XXXVI, no. 9670, (December 2, 1807) 3, America's Historical Newspapers/* Newsbank (accessed February 28, 2019).

³ Karol Kovalovich Weaver, “Funerals and Burial Practices,” *Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia* , <https://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/archive/category/karol-kovalovich-weaver/> (accessed November 19, 2018).

⁴ Georganne Rundblad, “Exhuming Women’s Premarket Duties in the Care of the Dead”, *Gender and Society*, 9 no. 2 (April 1995), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/189870>, 175 (accessed November 19, 2018).

their knowledge beyond their own households. Elizabeth Davenport, the wife of the town minister in New Haven colony, prepared herbal remedies, to treat illness in her community. Through a partnership with physician John Winthrop, Davenport was able to secure medications for use in the rural community where she lived.⁵ Other women in the New Haven colony came to assist Davenport when her son John Jr. was ill in 1660. Women traveled from outside the community when her son fell ill in 1666. The partnerships of mutual aid among these women provided moral support, helped avoid caregiver fatigue, and allowed women to exchange recipes for remedies.⁶

Midwives had a distinct role as gatekeepers of the realm of the living. Midwives aided in bringing new life into the world, and cared for women at a time of high infant and maternal mortality. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the maternal mortality rate in America was 1 to 1.5 percent for each birth. Women averaged five to eight children, putting the risk for lifetime maternal mortality as high as one in eight.⁷ Ten percent of children died during the first year.⁸ In New England, maternal death was about one in one hundred fifty, and still births about twenty percent. Midwife Martha Ballard had a much better statistic over her career. Over the twenty-seven years she practiced midwifery, from 1785 to 1812, only 1 in 195 mothers died and two percent of children were stillborn. Childbirth was a feminine, community event, without the presence of men. When a woman was close to delivery, the husband would contact the midwife, female family members, neighbors and friends. Other women in attendance offered moral support, and cared for household chores, such as cooking and cleaning while the mother recovered. Only on rare occasions, would a doctor be called to assist with a delivery. When the mother's life was at risk and the child thought to be deceased, doctors were called in to extract the remains.⁹

With the connection between birth and death in colonial America, some midwives assumed the role as nurses, and layers out of the dead. The same system of mutual support was necessary at times of illness and birth, was at times of death. Martha Ballard began her practice as a midwife shortly after moving to Hallowell, Maine in 1778.¹⁰ Ballard cared for several families in the community, including the family of Colonel William Howard during outbreaks of bilious fever between September of 1785 and 1787, which sickened twenty-five and killed eight.¹¹ Although her fees are not stated in the diary, Colonel Howard gave Ballard a gallon of white rum and two pounds of sugar in August of 1787, "...on account of my attendance of his family in a sickness."¹²

Ballard wrote in her journal that on October 11, 1785 she was, "...called in great haste to Colonel Howards. His wife & five children are very sick." She cared for the family in their home over the next five days, many times staying overnight to keep watch. She returned to Colonel Howard's, where she was "entertained" on October 22, when a severe storm hindered her return home from a delivery. Martha Ballard noted in her diary that the family were still sick, but were being tended to by another nurse. October 28 she was called back to the Colonel's to assist Mrs. Pollard, the wife of the town sexton, and a family member, "...to Lay out the Corps of his wife just now Deceast (sic). His Children yet very sick." One of the children died on November 6, but the rest of the family recovered. The next December, Martha Ballard returned to Howard's home, "to ascist (sic) Mrs. Pollard to Lay out his son James..." after an outbreak of canker rash.¹³

⁵ Rebecca J. Tannenbaum, "What Is Best to Be Done for These Fevers": Elizabeth Davenport's Medical Practice in New Haven Colony" *The New England Quarterly*, vol. 70, no.2 (June 1997) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/366703,282-283> (accessed August 10,2018).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 271.

⁷ G. J. Barker-Benfield, "Stillbirth and Sensibility: The Case of Abigail and John Adams", *Early American Studies*, vol.10, no.1 (winter 2012) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23546680,5-6> (accessed October 21,2018).

⁸ Dorothy A. Mays, *Women in Early America: Struggle Survival, and Freedom in a New World* (Santa Barbra, California: ABC-CLIO Inc., 2004) [googlebooks.com](https://www.googlebooks.com), 100 (accessed November 23, 2018).

⁹ Elaine G. Breslaw, *Lotion, Potions, Pills, and Magic: Health Care in Early America*, (New York: New York University Press, 2014) [googlebooks.com](https://www.googlebooks.com), 114-117 (accessed November 26, 2018).

¹⁰ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1990), 12.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹² *Ibid.*, 67.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 67-69.

At times of death, mutual support of neighbors, community members, and professionals eased stresses on the immediate family. Elizabeth Drinker, a Quaker housewife and herbalist, in late eighteenth century Philadelphia¹⁴ gives the account of a death of a neighbor in her diary on April 19, 1798:

We have lost our Neighbor Waln, she died this forenoon before nine and ten o'clock... I went over and stay'd with the affected children 'till their other friends and relations arrived-Moly Humphriss who lays her out, was also come, I then came away before that awful business commenced.¹⁵

As a good neighbor, Drinker assumed a role similar to the women who gathered at a birth, offering assistance with childcare and household chores in a time of crisis. But preparations of the dead in Philadelphia were less of a community affair, left to family, close friends, and hired professionals. Drinker cared for the children until other family members arrived, but left before preparations took place. The work of layers out of the dead varied based on location and wishes of the family. Laying out of the dead ranged from washing the body to more extensive preservation. The body was washed and dressed, groomed, the eyes and mouth closed. To close the eyes, coins or weighted objects were put on the lids. The mouth was closed by a strap wrapped around head and jaw, or by wedging a stick between the jaw and the breastbone. More extensive preparations could include removal of internal organs, blocking of orifices, and filling the body cavity with charcoal to slow decomposition.¹⁶ More extensive preparations were likely less common as the fear of premature burial persisted into the late nineteenth century.¹⁷

Layers out of the dead provided the family with a necessary service of preparing and dressing the body for burial, relieving a stress from family members who had been attending to a dying loved one. Friends and neighbors in smaller communities often offered assistance in preparing the dead to aid families that had experienced loss. Sara Osborn's memoir describes her feelings during a walk while her son was prepared for burial in 1744. "While friends were putting on his grave clothes, I went out in the field and walked, where, with more fecrecy (sic) and freedom, I could breathe out my foul (sic) to God."¹⁸ In preparation for burial, the deceased was wrapped in a winding sheet or dressed in a shroud. By 1775 use of the winding sheet for burial had fallen out of popularity in England,¹⁹ although the winding sheet was still used in parts of the United States until the mid-nineteenth century.²⁰ A shroud, often referred to as grave clothes, was a long sleeved open backed shift with drawstrings at the neck and wrists, which often had a hood. The garment was tied at the feet. The ankles were tied together, and arms tied to the body at the waist with the waistband of the shroud. By the 1770's the deceased were frequently dressed in stockings, slippers, and mittens, along with a shroud. English law dictated the use of wool alone for grave clothes, without flax, hemp, silk, hair, gold or silver, nevertheless linen was still preferred. Women also made these special clothing items for the deceased. When George Washington died three years earlier in 1799, he was buried in a shroud made by Margret Gretter of Alexandria. Estate records

¹⁴ Elaine Forman Crane, *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker The Life Cycle of an Eighteenth-Century Woman Abridged Edition* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), xv-xix.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Drinker, *Diary, April 19, 1798* in Karol K. Weaver, "Painful Leisure" and "Awful Business": Female Death Workers in Pennsylvania," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 140, no.1 (January 2016).

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5215/pennmaghistbio.140.1.0031>, 31 (accessed November 19, 2018).

¹⁶ Karol K. Weaver, "Painful Leisure" and "Awful Business": Female Death Workers in Pennsylvania," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 140, no. 1 (January 2016). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5215/pennmaghistbio.140.1.0031>, 39-40. (accessed November 19, 2018).

¹⁷ Dan Pipenbring, "I'm Not Dead Yet" January 6, 2016, *The Paris Review*.

<https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2016/01/06/im-not-dead-yet/> (accessed November 30, 2018).

¹⁸ Samuel Hopkins, *Memoirs and Life of Mrs. Sarah Osbourn: Who Died At Newport, Rhodeisland, On the Second Day of August, 1796, in Eighty Third Year of Her Age* (Worcester, Massachusetts: Leonard Worcester, 1799), <https://babel.hathitrust.org>, 68 (accessed November 18, 2018).

¹⁹ Mary V. Thompson, "The Lowest Ebb of Misery: Death and Mourning in the Family of George Washington" *Historic Alexandria Quarterly*, Spring 2001,

<https://www.alexandriava.gov/uploadedfiles/historic/haq/HistoricAlexandriaQuarterly2001Spring.pdf>, 8-9 (accessed November 25, 2018).

²⁰ Jamie Warren, "To Claim One's Own: Death and the Body in the Daily Politics of Antebellum Slavery" in *Death in The American South* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 119.

show that Gretter was paid for making the shroud and pall cloth.²¹ Some who had time to prepare for death left instructions to be buried in their own clothing. Martha Washington requested to be buried in one of her own dresses before her death in 1802.²²

In more rural areas the work of preparing the dead may have been viewed as offering mutual assistance to a neighbor. In larger cities such as Philadelphia, women offered their services for hire to aid in supporting themselves and their family. A strong connection between laying out the dead, nursing, and the medical profession remained, although some layers out of the dead worked in fields outside of nursing and midwifery. Philadelphia directories from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century provide evidence that women worked as professional layers out of the dead from the 1790's onward. As early as 1794, a woman named Rebecca Powell appears in the city of Philadelphia directory as a layer out of the dead.²³ Author Karol K. Weaver describes Powell as a woman who embraced "multiple identities". Powell appears in the 1790 census as a young widow with three children, a boy and three girls under the age of sixteen. After identifying herself as a layer out of the dead in 1794, she listed herself as a widow and a mantua maker for the next three years.²⁴ A mantua was a loose fitting gown worn over a separate skirt that "assumed the form of high fashion" without so clearly transgressing prescription for their class or station²⁵ that appealed to women of middle and upper incomes.²⁶ Powell lists herself as a layer out of the dead in 1801.²⁷ Powell offered her services as a tayloress, until in 1808, Powell is listed again as a layer out of the dead. Until 1825, Powell appears in directories as a layer out of the dead and a nurse.²⁸

The 1807 directory includes a separate section for physicians, midwives and nurses. Two women appear as layers out of the dead. Hannah January lists herself as a layer out of the dead. Selah Knowles lists herself as a nurse and layer out of the dead. January's entry as a layer out of the dead included in a section for nurses confirms that laying out of the dead was considered and extension of nursing and medical practice of the time. Knowles entry confirms the different but related roles.²⁹ In the 1808 Philadelphia directory, Powell appears listed as a layer out of the dead, with January, and Knowles, and Mary Humphreys in the section for nurses. Once again Knowles lists herself as "nurse and layer out of the dead..."³⁰ In 1820, thirteen women are listed as layers out of the dead. Knowles is listed as a widow and only a nurse.³¹

It is difficult to determine how many women provided services as layers out of the dead in Philadelphia. From Elizabeth Drinker's diary a woman known as Molly Humphriss was working as layers out of the dead in Philadelphia in 1798. The last name Humphriss does not appear in the Philadelphia directory for 1798. The family name Humphreys does appear in the directory, but there is not a listing for a woman named Molly.³² Molly could have been a recent arrival to the city, been married at the time, or the name Molly may have been the name she was known by, but not her legal name. Early city directories at first only listed the name of the male head of household and only later included the name of the wife of the head of household. Single women were frequently not included in city directories. Later directories often included occupation and marital status if

²¹ Thompson, "The Lowest Ebb of Misery," 9.

²² Ibid.

²³ *Philadelphia directory and register* (Philadelphia: James Hardey, 1794). GeoHistory Resources, <https://www.philageohistory.org>, 123 (accessed November 28, 2018).

²⁴ Weaver, "Painful Leisure" and "Awful Business," 41-42.

²⁵ Marla, R. Miller, "The Last Mantuamaker: Craft Tradition and Commercial Change in Boston, 1760—1845." *Early American Studies* 4, no. 2 (2006) <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.wichita.edu/stable/23546428>, 379 (accessed November 30, 2018).

²⁶ Weaver, "Painful Leisure" and "Awful Business", 41-42.

²⁷ Philadelphia directory (Philadelphia: C.W. Stafford, 1801), GeoHistory Resources, <https://www.philageohistory.org>, 137. (accessed November 28, 2018).

²⁸ Weaver, "Painful Leisure" and "Awful Business," 42.

²⁹ *Philadelphia directory* (Philadelphia: James Robinson, 1807) accessed November 28, 2018, GeoHistory Resources <https://www.philageohistory.org>, IIII.

³⁰ *Philadelphia directory* (Philadelphia: James Robinson, 1808), GeoHistory Resources, <https://www.philageohistory.org>, np. (accessed November 28, 2018).

³¹ *Philadelphia directory and register* (Philadelphia: Edward Whitley, 1820), GeoHistory Resources, <https://www.philageohistory.org>, 72, 103, 158, 190, 194, 222, 225, 231, 235, 256, 354, 471, 480. (accessed November 28, 2018).

³² *Philadelphia directory* (Philadelphia: C.W. Stafford, 1798) GeoHistory Resources, <https://www.philageohistory.org>, 74-75. (accessed November 28, 2018).

a woman was as widow.³³ If Molly were married in 1789 she may not have been listed in the directory. Molly may have had a different legal name than the name she was known by to friends and acquaintances. Molly is an Irish derivative of the name Mary.³⁴ Entries do appear for a woman listed as a widow and later as a layer out of the dead with a similar name, Mary Humphreys, beginning in 1799. The 1799 Philadelphia directory has a listing for Mary Humphreys, “a widow, 30 Carter’s alley” but does not include an occupation.³⁵ In 1808 an entry appears for Mary Humphreys, “layer out of the dead Carter’s alley”.³⁶ Although Molly Humphreys in Drinker’s diary may not be the same person as Mary Humphreys, appearing first as a widow and later as a layer out of the dead, we know from Elizabeth Drinker’s diary that women were working as layers out of the dead in Philadelphia who are not listed in the city directory.

Coffin Makers

Care for the sick, dying, and preparation of the dead was a role assumed by women as an extension of their duties to responsibility for the household. Other aspects of the burial ritual fell into traditionally assigned male roles, including the relationship between carpentry and coffin making. In Colonial America coffins were constructed by local cabinet makers, carpenters or wheelwrights, after a death had occurred. The simple style of early coffins required simple hardware, a limited number of tools, and only a few boards to construct. The coffin was a hexagonal “shoulder” or “pinch toe” wooden box, constructed with a flat lid. Another style of coffin common in Colonial America had a gabled lid. The coffin was rectangular or trapezoid in shape with a gabled ridge running along the length of the coffin lid. Six-sided coffins with gabled lids were also used but required a more skilled craftsmanship.³⁷ Archeological excavations near the site of Jamestown revealed evidence of the use of six-sided flat topped coffin and a six sided gabled lid coffin made from yellow pine during the early seventeenth century. Although more difficult to construct, gabled lid coffins were not uncommon in the early seventeenth century. Use of coffins indicates the individuals were of higher social status.³⁸ Other remains from the 1620s uncovered by archeologists at Jamestown during times of famine and frequent Indian attacks were buried without coffins.³⁹

Until 1670 the most common style of coffin used in England and the colonies was a four sided trapezoid shaped. After 1670 coffins shifted to a hexagonal shape. Timothy Riordan examined coffins at the St. Mary’s city cemetery of graves from 1638 to 1730 and found seven styles of coffins in use, three of which had gabled lids. Coffins from graves after 1700 were hexagonal in shape. All adult burials at the Walton Burial ground in Griswold, Connecticut, in use between 1757 and the early nineteenth century, were in hexagonal shaped coffins.⁴⁰

John Head, a Philadelphia carpenter, joiner, and merchant built over sixty-five coffins and other furniture between 1717 and 1743. Head constructed coffins from pine, black painted pine, and offered more expensive models made of walnut. In the 1750s New York joiner and merchant Joshua Delaplaine sold coffins

³³ Gina Philibert-Ortega, “Genealogy Tip: Using Directories to Find Your Female Ancestors”, *genealogybank.com* (accessed August 22, 2016). <https://blog.genealogybank.com/genealogy-tip-using-directories-to-find-your-female-ancestor.html>, (accessed November 28, 2018).

³⁴ Roots of Ireland, “List of Common First Name Variations, entry for Mary” *rootsireland.ie*, <http://www.rootsireland.ie/help/first-names/> (accessed November 28, 2018).

³⁵ Philadelphia directory (Philadelphia: C.W. Stafford, 1799), GeoHistory Resources, <https://www.philageohistory.org>, 72. (accessed November 28, 2018).

³⁶ Philadelphia directory (Philadelphia: James Robinson, 1808), GeoHistory Resources, np.

³⁷ Charles H. LeeDecker, “Preparing for an Afterlife on Earth: The Transformation of Mortuary Behavior in Nineteenth-Century North America,” in *International Handbook of Historical Archaeology*, ed. Teresita Majewski, David Gaimster (New York, Springer 2009) googlebooks.com, 143. (accessed November 22, 2018).

³⁸ Historic Jamestown. “Jamestown Rediscovery-Archology- Who Shot JR,” *Historicjamestowne.org* <https://historicjamestowne.org/archaeology/map-of-discoveries/other-burials/> (accessed November 22, 2018).

³⁹ Ivor Noel Hume, “Alas Poor...Who? Or, Melancholy Moments in Colonial and Later Virginia” *Historic Jamestowne.orgCW Journal* (Spring 2005), <http://www.history.org/foundation/journal/spring05/funerals.cfm> (accessed November 22, 2018).

⁴⁰ Patricia C. O’Donnell, “This Side of the Grave Navigating the Quaker Plainness in London and in Philadelphia in the Eighteenth Century” *Winterthur Portfolio* 49, no1 (Spring 2015). <https://works.swarthmore.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1078&context=sta-libraries>, 34-35 (accessed November 22, 2018)

including more expensive models made of wood from sweet gum trees. Delaplaine was commissioned to build a coffin for the mother of Lewis Morris from black walnut lined in white calico. On the top of the lid, her initials, date of death and age were added using white nail details. Although Delaplaine built furniture from mahogany he did not use the material for coffins. Through the 1760s coffins in Philadelphia were made of black walnut, with less expensive models being produced from poplar. By the late eighteenth century mahogany had become the preferred material for coffins among the more affluent.⁴¹

In the middle eighteenth century some cabinet makers began making coffins out of more luxurious mahogany, often with silver handles and nameplates. One of the earliest evidence is a bill of sale dated November 9, 1759, for fifty-five pounds from woodworker John Cahoone of Newport, Rhode Island to John Easton for “Mahogany Coffin for Your Wife”. By 1770, David Evans of Philadelphia sold mahogany coffins in a variety of price ranges, suggesting varying qualities of wood or complexity. Documents from 1762 to 1776 show that Job Townsend Jr., a woodworker in Rhode Island, regularly produced mahogany coffins.⁴² Mahogany was the choice material for coffins of the wealthy and elite of the new nation. In 1799 George Washington was buried in a lead lined mahogany coffin, inside a wood case, covered in black fabric.⁴³ Master woodworkers such as Cahoone subcontracted the manufacture of common pieces used in furniture making to keep on hand for assembly. Surviving records indicate woodworking was a male profession that did not employ women.⁴⁴

Although elaborate coffins built by master woodworkers were available to the wealthier clients in urban centers, in rural areas the coffin would have been built by a community member, out of locally available materials. When Hannah Pollard’s young son died in March 1800, a local man Charles Gill built the coffin as a way of coming to aid of a family that had just lost a child. No description is given of the construction or materials, as the importance was not the construction, but the act of aiding a neighbor in a time of crisis.⁴⁵

The Role of the Sexton

A poem published in Portsmouth New Hampshire’s *New Hampshire-Spy* in June of 1787 describes the most notable role of the sexton; “Come, honest sexton, take thy spade, and let my grave be quickly made...”⁴⁶ Sextons were responsible for maintenance of religious buildings and grounds—including adjoining land used for burials, and ringing of the church bell. In larger cities such as Boston, bells were used as a way to announce community events, arrival of important visitors, the end of religious services, and funerals. Common maintenance duties of the Sexton including sweeping the meeting house or church, and maintaining a clock if there was one.⁴⁷ In smaller towns that did not have bells, such as Hallowell, Maine, the town sexton, Amos Pollard would have maintained the meeting house and grounds, allotted places of burial, and dug graves.⁴⁸ The role of a sexton was typically a male profession, although there were a few exceptions. Two Anglican churches in Prince Edward County, Virginia had female sextons in the late eighteenth century. It is possible that these women were hired to perform the duties of a sexton as a way to provide jobs for low income but able bodied widows, to help them remain self-sufficient. Judith Rutledge assumed the position of sexton for the Sandy River church after the passing of her husband, Richard who had been the church sexton. Mrs. Rutledge cleaned the church, escorted parishioners to their pews, and laundered linens used in church services including the ministers, surplice. She also served as a layer out of the dead, but there is no mention of digging graves as part of her duties. Mrs. Rutledge served as sexton for almost twenty years. Another widow, Mrs. Mary Barnett was hired as

⁴¹ Ibid., 36-38.

⁴² Jennifer L. Anderson, *Mahogany, The Cost of Luxury in America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2012), [googlebooks.com](https://books.google.com/books?id=44-45), 44-45. (accessed November 22, 2018).

⁴³ Mount Vernon.org “Coffin Fragment” Preservation Collection. <https://www.mountvernon.org/preservation/collections-holdings/browse-the-museum-collections/object/w-563/> (accessed November 22, 2018).

⁴⁴ Anderson, *Mahogany, The Cost of Luxury in America*, 44-45.

⁴⁵ Ulrich, *A Midwife’s Tale*, 257.

⁴⁶ Anonymous, “The Passing Bell”, *The New-Hampshire Spy (Portsmouth New Hampshire) II iss.65 (June 5,1787)*: 260., *America’s Historical Newspapers/ Newsbank* (accessed November 23,2018).

⁴⁷ The Colonial Society of Massachusetts, “Civic Announcements: The Role of Drums , Criers , and Bells in the Colonies- Bells” *Colonial Society.org*, <https://www.colonialsociety.org/node/2044> (accessed November 22, 2018)

⁴⁸ Ulrich, *A Midwife’s Tale*, 100.

a sexton by the Frenches church in 1771 and performed similar tasks.⁴⁹ Although the role of sexton was not typical for women— the duties they performed as sexton—cleaning, and laying out the dead, remained within the scope of gendered tasks for women of the time.

The Day of Burial - Pall Bearers and Transporting the Coffin.

The rituals on the day of burial varied based on the religious beliefs, location, and socioeconomic status of the family. Typically mourners gathered at the house with the surviving family members, opening with prayer and a short lecture before the journey to the site of the service, whether at a church or meeting house, or at the burial site. In rural areas or when the distance was shorter, the coffin would be hand carried to the site of the service. The number of persons varied and could require up to eight persons.⁵⁰ The coffin was typically carried on a bier, with an outer cloth covering called a pall. Younger men would carry the bier that held the coffin, while older men supported the cloth covering the coffin. If the coffin was to be moved a long distance, another group of men might trade out with those carrying the bier on which the coffin rested.⁵¹ The men were made up of those who had connections with the deceased and “under-bearers” who assisted with moving the coffin but were less closely connected to the family. At the burial of a small child, local children might carry the coffin.⁵²

In urban centers where roads were paved a hearse was at times used to transport the coffin. During the colonial period horse drawn hearses with coachmen were available to rent in cities, catering to the more affluent. The practice of using horse drawn hearses spread to small communities and towns by the beginning of the nineteenth century.⁵³ Although new technology was introduced, transporting the dead remained in the domain of men. The only exception was in the case of the death of a child.

The Day of Burial - The Service

A note sealed with black wax came this evening, inviting us to the funeral of John de Brahm tomorrow, at 3o'clock, at his dwelling at ye old York road. His long stay is at an end! His age I believe is 84 or very near it!

-*Elizabeth Drinker*, Diary, June 6, 1799⁵⁴

Funerals in the early year of the republic were for family and by invitation. Burial customs followed a standardized program including the gathering of relatives and friends, the procession, a sermon or prayers, burial, and assembling of mourners afterwards for refreshments.⁵⁵ Although the Quaker community shunned elaborate funeral and mourning customs, Puritan and Anglican communities adopted many of these rituals including designated mourning attire. Memorial gifts such as gloves and scarves were common. Wealthier individuals frequently commissioned memorial jewelry to be given as mementos.⁵⁶

The dead were prepared for burial in the home and transported to a local church or meeting house on the day of burial for religious services. Others were transported directly to the site of burial for graveside services and interment. Occasionally persons were laid out in the church where they had been members.⁵⁷ Women took part in funerals as an extension of their duties to house and home, provided hospitality to mourners, and took part in funeral processions, accompanying the remains of friends and family to burial.

⁴⁹ Linda Speth, *Women Family and Community in Colonial America: Two Perspectives Women & History No. 4* (New York: Routledge, 2011) [googlebooks.com](https://books.google.com), np. (accessed November 22, 2018).

⁵⁰ Gary Laderman, *These Sacred Remains American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799-1883* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 32-33.

⁵¹ New England Historical Society, “Seven Strange Facts About Colonial Funerals” [NewenglandHistoricalsociety.com](http://www.newenglandhistoricalsociety.com/seven-strange-facts-colonial-funerals/) <http://www.newenglandhistoricalsociety.com/seven-strange-facts-colonial-funerals/> (accessed November 21, 2018).

⁵² Laderman, *These Sacred Remains*, 32-33.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁵⁴ Henry Biddle ed., *Excerpts from the Diary of Elizabeth Drinker From 1759 to 1807 AD* (Philadelphia: J.P. Lippincott Company, 1899) <https://archive.org>, 341-343. (accessed November 19, 2018).

⁵⁵ 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* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 58.

⁵⁶ David E. Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 113.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 112.

The Drinker family hosted mourners at their home for a close friend Sally Salter in April of 1781. Drinker noted in her diary of Sally's funeral preparations on April 27, "...her corpse is now at John Salter's, Magnolia, to be brought here to-morrow, and to be buried from our House in ye afternoon." The next day the body was transported to the house at about 10 o'clock in the morning. Funeral preparations went on throughout the day. Mourners and family members gathered at the Drinker home in the late afternoon after dinner and returned to the home after the service for refreshments. "She was interred in ye Church burying ground, at 6 in ye evening. Ye family came back to our House, and several others-15 or 20 drank tea with us."⁵⁸

The gathering of relatives, the procession, and assembling of mourners afterwards for refreshments mentioned in Drinkers diary follows the accepted pattern for burial in the late colonial period and early years of the Republic. As observant Quakers, Elizabeth Drinker and her household would not have donned mourning attire. In the early years of the republic, even the elite refrained from giving out traditional scarves and gloves associated with funeral traditions of the past.⁵⁹ Quaker tradition embraced modesty, plainness and humility. Quakers were not to participate in the tradition of wearing attire designated for mourning to funerals, did not ring bells, or cover the coffin with a pall.⁶⁰ The Quaker community viewed that death should not be feared. Death was the "culmination of a spiritual life", with the deceased going on to a better place, so excessive mourning was discouraged.⁶¹

Although some Quakers adopted common traditions followed at the time it was rebuked by the church. In February of 1797, a group of women took part of a Quaker funeral procession for a child that had died. The women were dressed in white dresses with powdered hair. White was the color at the time designated as mourning attire for the death of a child, or young unmarried woman. Powdered hair was the style of the day. Quakers forbid donning mourning attire and strictly required women to cover their hair with bonnets in public. Although only one of the four women in question was a Quaker, the overseer of the congregation, John Davenport wrote to the reprimand the family for the attire of the four women who took part in the procession. Davenport was, "... much affected, as I believe every solid Friend present also was, with the manner of carrying it to the grave; so different from the plainness and simplicity into which our principles lead." Davenport continued,

I need not remind you that we profess to be a plain self-denying people, called to bear a testimony against the vain and foolish fashions of the world. These never appear more idle and inexcusable than at funerals, when our minds ought to be impressed with a most solemn and awful sense of our own mortality, and the sense of uncertainty in which we exist.⁶²

Anglican services differed due to location, and were more elaborate than those of the Quakers. Many Anglicans lived in the southern colonies and were part of the planter class. Instead of being buried in graveyards they were buried on private burial plots on their plantations. Due to the great distance from rural plantations to the local parish churches, at times up to sixty miles, many could not be transported to the church for services. It had become, "...customary to bury in Gardens or Orchards, where whole families lye interred together, in a Spot generally handsomely enclosed, planted with Evergreens and the Graves kept decently..."⁶³ Anglicans in rural areas frequently held two separate services, a private burial service on the day of internment, followed by a more public funeral service later at the parish church. Religious ceremonies were performed at the home the day of the burial at the home. Another service, a funeral, was frequently performed up to several weeks later at the parish church. If a burial and funeral occurred on the same day with no later service to follow and the burial was not private a procession followed the deceased to the site of burial. Firing of guns at the gravesite was an

⁵⁸ Biddle, *Excerpts from the Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*, 133-134.

⁵⁹ Thompson, "Lowest Ebb of Misery," 11.

⁶⁰ O'Donnell, "This Side of the Grave," 48.

⁶¹ Mays, *Women in America*, 102.

⁶² O'Donnell, "This Side of the Grave," 29-30.

⁶³ Hugh Jones, *Present State of Virginia*, (New York: Reprinted for Sabin Jones, 1865). <https://archives.org>, 67-68 (accessed December 1,2018).

Anglican tradition during the seventeenth century, but had become less common by the eighteenth century.⁶⁴ Anglicans mourned at death but did not fear judgement by God as Puritans did. A banquet followed the ceremony with food and heavy drinking.⁶⁵ By 1700 some excess consumption of alcohol had become a concern, with some wills specifying not to provide alcohol at the funeral banquet.⁶⁶ A meal following a funeral in the 1780s that took place three weeks after a burial describes, men and women going into separate rooms after the service, and “a table was spread with funeral cake and wine sealed with black.” Afterwards, “a cold dinner” was served. The day of the funeral, close members of the family wore mourning attire, ranging from full mourning to a black ribbon or armband. Family members and close friends frequently received mourning rings and gloves as gifts.⁶⁷

Among the Anglican planter class of the south, a multitude of roles associated with death and dying were performed by slaves. During George Washington’s final illness in 1799, slaves tended the fire to warm the sickroom and were sent to bring the doctor. On the day of Washington’s death, he was surrounded by family members, close friends, medical professionals, and attended to by his personal slave, Christopher Sheels. Upon Washington’s death, slave men and women prepared his body, dug the grave, and prepared the post burial banquet.⁶⁸

Puritan anxiety surrounding death derived from a belief in predestination- that God decided the fate of humans before birth. Through contemplation, introspection, Puritans sought signs, to determine if they were of the “few elect” or the multitude of the damned, but there was no way to be certain. Puritan funerals in the first half of the seventeenth century were simple affairs but became more elaborate by the latter half of the eighteenth century. Neighbors and friends gathered as a bell tolled.⁶⁹ A prayer was said before the procession. The procession, led by the most prominent person, usually a minister or magistrate, followed by close family, and other mourners, accompanied the deceased to the site of burial, often without a funeral sermon. The procession would then return to the home of the deceased for meal.⁷⁰ Alcohol was frequently consumed in large quantities. 1678 bill for funeral expenses lists “8 gallons & 3 quarts of wine” and a Barrel of Cider” among the expenditures.⁷¹

By the 1690s Puritan funeral processions advanced to burial grounds to the sound of tolling bells, the bereaved arrayed scarves, gloves, ribbons, and cloaks designed for mourning. The hearse and horses were draped with banners, painted with winged death heads. Invitations were sent out in advance in the form of gloves that mourners wore while attending the funeral. Prayers were included in the ceremony. After the interment, mourners returned to the church or home for banquet, and distribution of commemorative rings to family members and close friends. The gold rings were often inlaid with black enamel, adorned with skeletons, coffins and death heads to remind the wearer of the nearness of death.⁷² Author Allan I. Ludwig observes that Puritans practiced similar traditions at marriage and death, such as sending gloves as invitations and giving rings. Poems by Ann Bradstreet and writings by Puritan Minister Thomas Hooker support his suggestion that some Puritans came to understand death as, “a spiritual marriage between Christ and the soul.”⁷³

⁶⁴ Thad Tate, “Funeral in Eighteenth Century Virginia” *Research Report Colonial Williamsburg, 1956*, <http://research.history.org/DigitalLibrary/view/index.cfm?doc=ResearchReports%5CRR0085.xml&highlight, 2-4.> (accessed November 30, 2018).

⁶⁵ Mays, *Women in America*, 102.

⁶⁶ Tate, “Funeral in Eighteenth Century Virginia,” 4-5.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 2-4.

⁶⁸ Lorri Glover, “When “History Becomes Fable Instead of Fact”: The Deaths and Resurrections of Virginia’s Leading Revolutionaries” in *Death in the American South* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 58-71.

⁶⁹ Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death*, 109.

⁷⁰ Mays, *Women in America*, 102.

⁷¹ Alice Morse Earle, *Customs and Fashions in Old New England* (New York: Charles Scribner’s & Sons, 1894), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/24159/24159-h/24159-h.htm#XV> , 370 (accessed December 1, 2018).

⁷² Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death*, 112-115.

⁷³ Allan I. Ludwig, *Graven Images New England Stonecarving and its Symbols, 1650-1815* (Middleton, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1966), 61-62.

By the early to middle eighteenth century, Puritan funeral excesses resulted in legislation to curb costly funerals.⁷⁴ Elaborate funerals often consumed up to twenty percent of an estate.⁷⁵ Massachusetts colonial authorities became wary of the potential economic impact of elaborate funerals. The “unnecessary expense” of large funerals could plunge families into poverty. The colonial government of Massachusetts passed laws in the early 1720s and again in the 1740s to curb what they deemed excessive funeral expenditures. The regulations prohibited the giving of gifts at burials including gloves, scarves, wine, rum, and rings.⁷⁶

Mourning in the Late Colonial and Early Republic Periods

Just Imported in Last Ship from London, and Sold by Anna Houghton on the North side of the Town House, the best Padafoys, black bombozense, fine Mourning Crapes, Widows Crapes, Mens, Womens, and Childrens Mourning gloves, hose and handkerchiefs, also all other things suitable for mourning, likewise sundry other sorts of fine English goods at reasonable rates.⁷⁷ Advertisement, *The Boston Gazette*, September 10, 1733

Prior to the eighteenth century, wearing of mourning attire had been limited to the nobility. Black dyes were costly and sumptuary laws prevented persons from wearing clothing above their social status. With the industrial revolution, a new wealthy merchant class drove the demand for goods that had once been limited to the nobility. Mass production of consumer goods and textiles expanded access to products that had been in less plentiful supply.⁷⁸ In the years leading up to and following the Revolutionary War mourning traditions diminished.⁷⁹

By the eighteenth century black had become the traditional color for funerals. For the death of a child light gray or white was preferred.⁸⁰ White was the color for mourning for young unmarried women.⁸¹ Prescribed periods for mourning in the late colonial and early years of the Republic remained isolated in practice among more affluent families. Martha Washington followed prescribed mourning upon the death of her first husband Daniel Parke Custis in 1757 by ordering mourning clothing for herself, her three year old son, and the domestic slaves. A year later she shed her mourning attire for clothing appropriate for a second stage of mourning. She requested her new ensembles neither “to be grave but not Extravagant (sic) nor to be mourning.”⁸² After the death of Martha’s daughter in 1773⁸³ George Washington ordered to England for shoes, gloves, clothing and accessories appropriate for the second stage of mourning for Martha and himself including a men’s beaver hat and a “Second Suit of Mourning” for himself.⁸⁴

In the years following the American Revolution mourning customs became less elaborate even among wealthy households. When George Washington’s mother died in 1789 black arm bands, cockades and sword knots were purchased for the men of the household including domestics and all social activities were canceled for one week. A Congressional resolution in 1774 had called to moderate mourning customs to “...a black crape or ribbon on the arm or hat, for gentlemen and a black ribbon and necklace for ladies.”⁸⁵ By 1765 many had

⁷⁴ Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death*, 115.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 112-115.

⁷⁶ Ludwig, *Graven Images*, 60.

⁷⁷ Advertisement for Mourning Attire, *The Boston Gazette*, September 3, 1733 America’s Historical Newspapers/ Newsbank. (accessed December 1, 2018).

⁷⁸ Dolores Monet, “Fashion History-Mourning Dress-Black Clothing Worn During Bereavement,” January 3, 2018. *Bellatory.com* <https://bellatory.com/fashion-industry/FashionHistoryMourningDressBlackClothingWornDuringBereavement>. (accessed November 18, 2018).

⁷⁹ Thompson, “Lowest Ebb of Misery,” 11.

⁸⁰ O’Donnell, “This Side of the Grave,” 34.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁸² Thompson, “Lowest Ebb of Misery,” 11.

⁸³ Mount Vernon.org, “Digital Encyclopedia of George Washington, entry for Martha Parke Custis,” <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/martha-parke-custis/> (accessed December 1, 2018).

⁸⁴ Thompson, “Lowest Ebb of Misery,” 11.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

begun to abandon elaborate displays of mourning even at funerals. Non-importation agreements may have contributed to this trend during leading up to the Revolutionary War.⁸⁶

Importation of British goods including mourning items resumed after the war, creating concern among some. In 1805, a columnist from the Boston based *Independent Chronicle* expressed dismay regarding the volume of British textile imports flooding into the United States. The “renewal of wearing black at funerals”, posed an economic danger to the United States as many of these goods were imported from Britain. Five-eighths of annual importations from Britain consisted of, “articles of foppery, fashion and superfluities”, of which mourning apparel comprised the majority.⁸⁷

Public Mourning in the Early Republic

In December of 1799, the United States planned its first state funeral. George Washington was laid to rest in a private service at Mt. Vernon four days after his death on December 18, 1799. Infantry and mounted military units took part in the procession to the family burial vault as a band played “a solemn dirge”. Two slaves in mourning attire led Washington’s riderless horse, “bearing his pistols and holsters.” Eleven cannons fired from the estate, echoed by returning fire from a schooner nearby on the Potomac. At the site of burial, a religious service was performed by four ministers, two Anglican and two Presbyterian, followed by a Masonic ceremony.⁸⁸

The death of George Washington was the first large display of public mourning in the early republic. As news of George Washington’s death spread, church bells tolled and shops closed. Military officers wore mourning crape, and flags flew at half-staff at commemorations throughout the country.⁸⁹ On December 25, 1799, eleven days after Washington’s death, Elizabeth Drinker recorded in her diary concerning an event scheduled for the following day.

There is to be great doings tomorrow by way of respect to General Washington’s memory: a funeral procession, an oration, or a eulogium to be delivered by Henry Lee, a member of Congress from Virginia. The Members of Congress are to be in deep mourning; the citizens generally to wear crape round their arms, for six months. Congress-hall is in mourning, and even the Play-house...⁹⁰

As Quakers, Drinker refers to the customs as, “... out of our way,” but others in the community did take part.⁹¹ Events continued for the next two months until what would have been George Washington’s sixty-eighth birthday on February 22, 1800.⁹²

Later events of public mourning adopted similar elements. When a fire destroyed a crowded Richmond theater the day after Christmas in 1811, killing seventy-two, business closed for two days. Days of mourning were observed in Norfolk and ships lowered flags to half-mast. Congress passed a resolution to wear crape arm bands for a month. Other persons around the country wore mourning attire voluntarily for a month to show solidarity with those who lost loved ones in the Richmond Theater fire.⁹³ Although due to distance, citizens could not offer support by directly aiding families in a time of loss the show of moral support was an attempt to follow the older colonial tradition of offering aid at times of loss.

During the colonial period, and the years of the new Republic, death most frequently occurred in the home, as with the wife of Cornel Howards attended to by Martha Ballard.⁹⁴ Women prepared the body and dressed it for burial as part of a system of mutual aid. In urban areas such as Philadelphia, women worked as professional layer out of the dead to aid in supporting families.⁹⁵ Men built coffins, sometimes as a service to

⁸⁶ Tate, “Funeral in Eighteenth Century Virginia,” 7.

⁸⁷ Editorial, “Non-Intercourse, versus British Depredations”, *The Independent Chronicle (Boston, Massachusetts) vol. XXXVII issu.2562 (November 21, 1805) 2*, *America’s Historical Newspapers/ Newsbank* (accessed December 2, 2018).

⁸⁸ Thompson, “The Lowest Ebb of Misery,” 10.

⁸⁹ Jewel Spangler, “American Mourning: Catastrophe, Public Grief, and the Making of Civic Identity in the Early National South” in *Death in the American South* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 93-94.

⁹⁰ Biddle ed., *Excerpts from the Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*, 353.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 353.

⁹² Jewel Spangler, “American Mourning” in *Death in the American South*, 93-94.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 101-109.

⁹⁴ Ulrich, *A Midwife’s Tale*, 67-69.

⁹⁵ Weaver, “Painful Leisure” and “Awful Business,” 41-42.

the family as Charles Gill did for Hannah Pollard's family in 1800.⁹⁶ Other men such as John Head, of Philadelphia built coffins as an extension of his business as a furniture maker.⁹⁷ A sexton dug the grave. Although not all sextons were male, descriptions of the duties of women who served as sextons did not include digging of graves.⁹⁸ On the day of the funeral, men transported the coffin by hand, or by hearse to the site of burial. Women participated in the funeral ceremony by providing hospitality to mourners, as an extension of their role in the home⁹⁹ and taking part in the procession.¹⁰⁰

With exception for those of the Quaker faith,¹⁰¹ women and men participated in mourning rituals by donning attire, based on social status, and community expectations. Martha Washington donned mourning attire and followed the prescribed rites of a mourning widow after the death of her first husband, Daniel Parke Custis in 1757. After the death of her daughter in 1773, Martha and her husband George Washington ordered to England for appropriate mourning attire.¹⁰² Upon the death of George Washington, the new nation developed public mourning traditions. Modeled on older traditions, those of higher social status, such as officers and government officials, wore more visible displays of mourning than those expected of persons of lower stations.¹⁰³ In times of disaster, the new nation sought to reinvent the colonial model of mutual aid, by showing solidarity with those who experienced loss. Although many aspects outside the home were dominated by men, women fashioned a place for themselves in colonies and early republic in death rituals as an extension of caring for home and family.

⁹⁶ Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale*, 257.

⁹⁷ O'Donnell, "This Side of the Grave," 36-38.

⁹⁸ Linda Speth, *Women Family and Community in Colonial America: Two Perspectives Women & History No. 4* (New York: Routledge, 2011), <https://books.google.com>, np. (accessed November 22, 2018).

⁹⁹ Biddle, *Excerpts from the Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*, 133-134.

¹⁰⁰ O'Donnell, "This Side of the Grave," 29-30.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁰² Thompson, "The Lowest Ebb of Misery," 9.

¹⁰³ Jewel Spangler, "American Mourning" in *Death in the American South*, 93-94, 101-109.