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“The Vegetables Really Get More Tender Care”: An Introduction to Death and Dying in the Civil War

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Abstract

The Victorian world was one of ceremony and order, even in death. Deathways—the practices of a society regarding death and dying—in 19th-century America focused on elaborate rituals that earned the country the grisly distinction of possessing a “culture of death.” The American Civil War presented a four-year window in which many of these traditions were radically challenged in both the North and the South, as loved ones died anonymous deaths far from the embrace of kin. Nevertheless, the warring populations attempted to maintain important traditions even as the horrors of war surrounded them, thus allowing the deathways of the antebellum years to survive even into the early days of the 20th century. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Death, Deathways, Dying, Funerals, Lincoln, The Good Death, Victorian America

Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

“The Vegetables Really Get More Tender Care”: An Introduction to Death and Dying in the Civil War

By [Zachary Wesley '20](#)

The Victorian world was one of ceremony and order, even in death. Deathways—the practices of a society regarding death and dying—in 19th century America focused on elaborate rituals that earned the country the grisly distinction of possessing a “culture of death.” The American Civil War presented a four-year window in which many of these traditions were radically challenged in both the North and the South, as loved ones died anonymous deaths far from the embrace of kin. Nevertheless, the warring populations attempted to maintain important traditions even as the horrors of war surrounded them, thus allowing the deathways of the antebellum years to survive even into the early days of the 20th century.

“The Good Death” and the *ars moriendi* (the art of death) are two common names for what was expected of a “proper” death during the Victorian Era, a concept that drew heavily on themes from Protestant Christianity. Ideally, the dying individual would be surrounded by loved ones in their final moments, speaking inspirational words and repenting of any sins that they might still harbor. When death finally came, it was to be faced fearlessly and calmly, once more inspiring all who were present with the promises of a reunion in heaven. From the point of death, the rituals of mourning began. Clocks were stopped at the time of death, blinds and shutters were drawn, and mirrors were turned to face the wall (or at the very least covered) to prevent the spirit of the departed from becoming trapped or dooming a user of the mirror to certain death. Black mourning dresses became the standard dress for women during this time, while men donned black suits or perhaps mourning armbands.

The women of the family often prepared the body for burial, though undertakers might be summoned by wealthier families. Viewings and vigils often preceded the funeral, with vigils lasting a full twenty-four hours. If a family had them, servants watched over the body during the night. Candles remained lit and flowers were often placed near the body in part to mask decay. The course of the funeral ultimately depended on how well-to-do the deceased individual was, as funerals “held with tasteful decorum were a sign of good breeding.” One example of such a funeral early in the war can be found in the July 22, 1861 issue of the *Richmond Dispatch*. Lieutenant Humphrey H. Miles had been killed in action four days earlier near Manassas Junction while leading soldiers of the First

Virginia Infantry and was laid to rest on Saturday the twentieth in Hollywood Cemetery. The newspaper account describes the funeral procession “evinced the respect with which the deceased was regarded.” As a member of the Masons, he was buried with full Masonic honors, while his wife and children were left to “to mourn the sad fortune of war.”

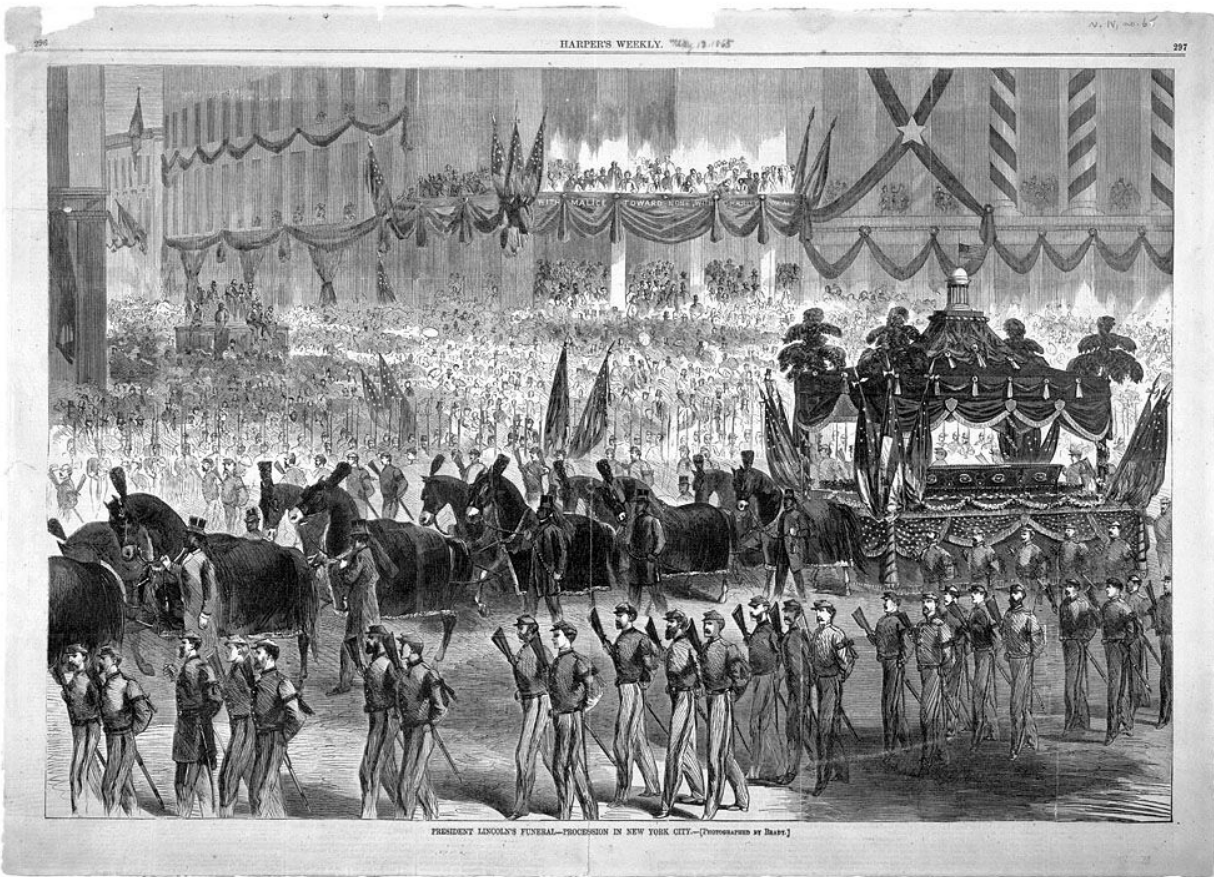


The above photograph, taken by Alexander Gardner, depicts dead of the Second South Carolina Infantry in the Rose Woods at Gettysburg. Note the shallowness of the grave. Photo credit: Gettysburg National Military Park. <https://npsgnmp.wordpress.com/2012/07/26/what-happened-to-gettysburgs-confederate-dead/>

As Lieutenant Humphrey’s death occurred so early in the war, his family was fortunate enough to receive his corpse for burial, though Northern and Southern families alike faced the terrifying reality that they would not know a loved ones’ final resting place or hear their final words as the war progressed. In some cases, doctors, nurses, chaplains, and other soldiers might record the final words of a dying soldier, sending it on to the family he left behind. These “proxy” relatives became essential middle-men in the wartime disruptions of accepted deathways, providing closure to families. Expected final words or knowledge of how death came became a grim luxury for countless Northerners and Southerners, who often brooded on the same question: did he die a “good” death? Heroic battlefield exploits confirmed for many that a soldier in question had died well, fully embodying the Victorian virtues of romantic masculinity. Nevertheless, loved ones’ thoughts often returned to fears of an anonymous death on the battlefield, where the likelihood of recording a soldier’s final words—nevermind providing a proper burial—was slim.

In the aftermath of battle, the sheer volume of the dead often overwhelmed the armies’ burial parties preparing to march again. At Gettysburg, for instance, some estimates placed the weight of human and animal corpses awaiting burial parties on July 4, 1863

at a staggering six million pounds. Although some “fortunate” cases saw comrades retrieve dead friends or family members for burial at home, far too many soldiers lacked this luxury. Common burials in the form of mass graves marked the battlefields. Even when individual burials were possible, the standard marker of a “decent” burial, the coffin, was a rarity. Shallow graves eroded by wind and rain often yielded their inhabitants to the air. Hogs who searched for the rotting corpses of fallen soldiers became a ghastly and frequent sight in the months after a battle. One Chaplain described the treatment of the dead as a process similar to how farmers “cover potatoes and roots to preserve them from the frost of winter; with this exception, however: the vegetables really get more tender care.” Soldiers and civilians alike were appalled by the conditions their heroes faced in death, ultimately sparking the movement that led to the creation of the first national cemeteries. This sense of unity in honoring the Union dead, however, reached its most powerful expression following Abraham Lincoln’s death on the morning of April 15, 1865. Returning wounded continued to fill Northern cemeteries as ministers across the Union sought to provide context to the shocking loss of the president, declaring him the “last casualty of the Civil War,” even as personal losses continued to mount. The victory of the Union cause coupled with the death of Lincoln created a powerful fusion of civic duty and Protestant Christian deathways.



President Lincoln's funeral procession depicted in Harper's Weekly. Photo via Wikimedia Commons.

During the uncertainty of war, countless loved ones at home turned to the traditions of death and mourning for a sense of closure. The comforting familiarity of these rituals fostered “a belief they could move through their despair.” Mourning attire also represented a sense of larger unity, with many Southern women seeing the black folds of mourning dresses representing the grim reality of Southern losses in the conflict. In the North, too, the toll of death was felt in countless households. The death toll of the war numbered greater the entire male populations of Alabama or Georgia or more than twice the entire population of Vermont at the time. The formerly-Protestant traditions of death and dying customs expanded into Catholic and even non-Christian households as loved ones and soldiers searched for closure with the loss of loved ones and brothers in arms. Lincoln’s death became the ultimate, national example of how the nation understood mourning customs, and indeed did much to formally cement these traditions as part of American culture at large for at least half a century after the war.

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