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## Funeral Practices in Upper Northeast Adams

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# Funeral Practices in Upper Northeast Adams

## **Abstract**

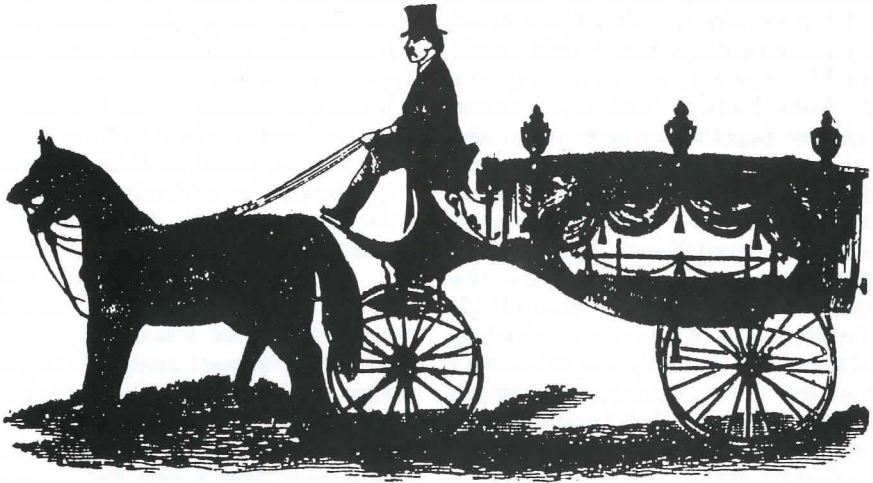
In 1994 in upper north-east Adams county, local people relate thoughts of death with advanced age, hospitals, and nursing homes. Occasionally, there is an accident or irreversible medical problem involving a younger person. These infrequent occurrences receive much attention from the community. Widespread fear of infant mortality is not manifest.

However, in this same area, from colonial times until about 1920 death occurred in a more widely dispersed fashion: far from being merely the prospect of the elderly, death's inevitability was the unseen companion of young and old alike. Death could occur at random. Mortality was a distinct possibility for every child. The cultural effects of the ensuing, profoundly different perspective are evidenced in the area's music, art, and folk beliefs. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

Adams County Historical Society, ACHS, Adams County, Pennsylvania History, Death, Mortality, Funeral, Mourning

ADVERTISEMENTS.



PERFECT PRESERVATION

OF THE DEAD,

WITHOUT ICE OR MUTILATION.

Avoids the annoyance of ice box. Also have a

*NEW PATENT ICE CASKET.*

Can keep the dead from 3 days to 3 weeks. I am thoroughly prepared to attend to the dead with the finest hearse in York, Adams or Franklin counties. Have on hand at all times a large stock of Undertakers Trimmings, Coffins and Caskets. Have a full line of Catholic and Protestant emblems.

Can furnish a fine coffin for \$20.00.

No charge for Hearse, nor for embalming for a short time.

If you want to remove the discoloration of the dead;

If you want to give the composure of peace, beauty and tranquillity to the dead;

If you want to be able to arrange the time of funerals for those at a distance;

If you want humid exhalations to cease, so that contagion cannot be communicated,

GIVE ME A TRIAL AND BE CONVINCED.

**R. BARNES,**

Between the Square and the Railroad,

LITTLESTOWN, PA.

ALSO, FURNITURE DEALER. See page 80.

*From The History and Directory of the Boroughs of Adams County (Gettysburg, 1880), p. 84.*

# Funeral Practices in Upper Northeast Adams\*

by Nancy DeLong

## Introduction

She has gone and left us and  
only did she leave us sorrow;  
She has gone up yonder to a  
home in heaven — Never come back  
any more no — never come back any  
more.

— Stone of Hetty Ann Elizabeth  
d. 1867, aged 19 years,  
Quaker-Dunkard Cemetery  
near Center Mills, Pa.

In 1994 in upper north-east Adams county, local people relate thoughts of death with advanced age, hospitals, and nursing homes. Occasionally, there is an accident or irreversible medical problem involving a younger person. These infrequent occurrences receive much attention from the community. Widespread fear of infant mortality is not manifest.

However, in this same area, from colonial times until about 1920 death occurred in a more widely dispersed fashion: far from being merely the prospect of the elderly, death's inevitability was the unseen companion of young and old alike. Death could occur at random. Mortality was a distinct possibility for every child. The cultural effects of the ensuing, profoundly different perspective are evidenced in the area's music, art, and folk beliefs.

\* "Funeral Practices" is but one segment of a larger report titled, "Attitudes Toward Living and Dying: A Cultural Perspective." The complete work is available for study at the Adams County Historical Society in Gettysburg.

This section was written only because Dr. Charles H. Glatfelter insisted that this topic would be significant in a study of cultural patterns in Adams county; thus it has been only through Dr. Glatfelter's encouragement that the following information has been assembled.



## **Funeral Practices Within the Upper North-East Adams-County Locale, Nineteenth Century Through the Early Twentieth Century**

Funeral practices comprise a series of activities beginning immediately after a death has occurred and ending after the interment of the body, with the dispersal of worldly goods which were once the dead person's property. Within the sequence of activities, there has always been some sort of formal service of spiritual accounting and also some sort of gathering of friends, family, and community. Of all the areas of cultural research surveyed in this report, funeral practices seem to have been the customs most resistant to change. In order, therefore, to gain a clearer evolutionary appreciation of this aspect of culture, surveying a lengthier time-frame seems appropriate

### **The Undertaker's Goods and Services**

The most consistently available source of information about Adams county funerals 1800-1920 has been the estate papers housed at the Adams County Historical Society. The earliest county estate accounts show only a bill for the coffin. This implies that at first the family or family and physician prepared the body for burial themselves. Levi Hutton's estate, for example, indicates that in 1844 a coffin could cost as little as \$6.00. (Levi is buried in the old Quaker burial grounds east of Biglerville.) However, the coffin of John Bender, buried at Bender's Church in 1816, cost \$8.00, a third again as much Levi's. It may be assumed that this substantial difference in cost reflected the use of a different type of wood, amount of detailing, etc. Prices of caskets today are still dependent on such features.

In order to have what was considered a decent burial in colonial times, not only did the family need to procure a coffin, but it also needed a winding sheet or cloth called a *shroud*. The use of burial shrouds dates back to pre-biblical times. Indeed, in many ancient cultures the shroud was the essential physical burial feature: coffins were not used.

With each succeeding decade during the period 1800-1920 Adams countians increasingly employed more standardized funeral-related goods

and services. These physical funeral arrangements were supplied by the major undertaking establishments of the locale. For example, while the earliest local shrouds were no doubt provided directly through the efforts of family members, the most recent shrouds were exclusively procured through undertakers. The following paragraphs serve to illustrate these particular parallel trends.

The term *undertaker* came into standard use in America during the first half of the nineteenth century. The cultural developments which served to standardize the local undertaker's business occurred relatively passively. At first, a local man who could practice only one specialized trade was simply not practical to his community. Just as the cobbler also made horse harnesses because he was knowledgeable in working leather, the carpenter and cabinet-maker also made coffins because they possessed expertise in working wood. One did not decide to become an undertaker; rather, one answered a community need to make coffins because one had the skills and materials readily available. As styles and mores changed, one either adapted to fill the soon-to-be-common role of *undertaker*, or one fulfilled other community and personal needs. The career of the locale's most prominent early undertaker, Mr. Jonas Routzahn/Routsong provides an excellent illustration of this trend.

It seems that Jonas Routzahn/Routsong (1813-1889) never actually set out to become a professional undertaker, yet his account books show that he supplied more than 2,200 local funerals from his establishment in Bendersville.<sup>1</sup> The 1850 census announces Jonas's trade as "carpenter," yet he had already been supplying coffins to order for some time. In the 1850's Jones contracted for the building of three wooden bridges in upper Adams, the largest being built over the Bermudian Creek in 1854 for the sum of \$1,456.00. The census of 1860 identifies Jonas as a "cabinet-maker." When he was almost fifty years of age, Jonas was more inclined to supply furniture to the community than to continue with large-scale construction. Supplying coffins was part of being a "cabinet-maker," c. 1860. It is interesting to note that the 1889 appraisal of Jonas's own estate lists a significantly greater value in furniture inventory than in funeral items. His own obituary lists him as a good citizen, a carpenter, a contractor, and an undertaker—in that order.

The role of undertaker continued to evolve throughout the period 1800-1920. As mentioned, the earliest local shrouds were provided by family members, while the most recent came exclusively from the undertaker's stock. Estate records throughout the period hint that standardization was slowly taking place.



After the Civil War, the notations “coffin &c.” or “coffin and shroud” were often used next to an undertaker’s name, indicating that his establishment could provide families with an extended list of burial-related goods and services: the extended list was becoming common. The items requested, however, were by no means equal to the standardized package of goods and services that one encounters in today’s funeral home.

Often, funeral supplies were also procured in unique ways. For example, in 1850 records for the estate of George Group, administered by John Burkholder, Esq., indicate that undertaker Jonas Routzahn of the Bendersville borough provided a “coffin” for \$10.00 (probably with at least some decorative handles, for such a price). The next notation in the account is to a S. A. Burkholder: “for shrouds &c. . . . \$5.34.” S. A. Burkholder was probably a relative of John Burkholder, Esq., executor of the estate of George Group. John was thus employing the goods and services of two suppliers to provide for the Group funeral. Using two suppliers would be unheard of today unless a body needed to be moved a long distance. Citing further examples from the pre-Civil War period would only serve to illustrate how various were the earlier means of procuring appropriate arrangements for burials.

By 1920 the estate wording for all burial provisions had changed again. The common notation became the less explicit term—“Funeral Expense.” In most cases about this time, the lawyer’s wording gives no clue even as to which undertaker provided services for each funeral.

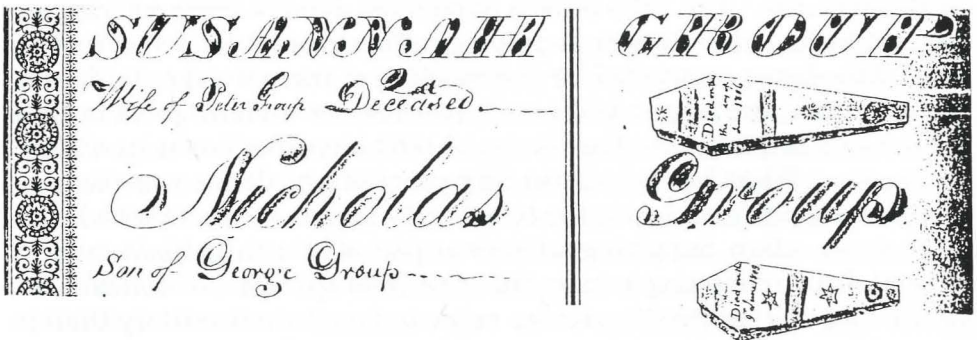
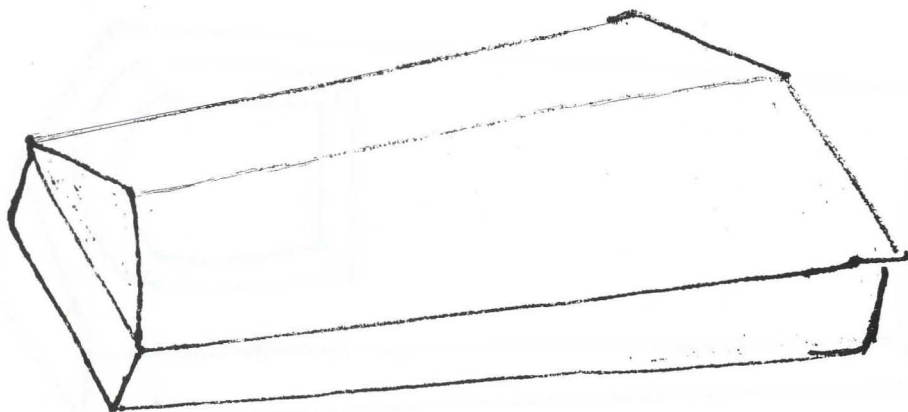


Fig. 1 - Sketches depicting the earliest coffin shape from Group family Bible in the author’s possession. (Susannah Group died 1806. Nicholas Group died 1809).

During the earliest part of the time period, the self-sufficiency of the local people resisted trends toward standardization. Local folks were comfortable with the idea of doing all that they could for themselves and their immediate neighbors. Conversely, urban centers were always decades ahead of the rural areas when it came to “stylish funerals.” Vari-

ous local men made the custom-sized coffins that folks were used to purchasing. As already mentioned, their coffin-making work often took on the aspect of a business side-line. Archie Guise of Tyrone township recalls seeing the iron rods that farmer George Fissel of Gardners once used to measure out the dimensions of coffins. Coffin making required precise carpentry skills because the shape of the coffins needed to conform to an ancient prototype (see figure No. 1) The distant Egyptians had even used this shape for their burial receptacles long before the time of Christ.

The wood of a typical coffin was only a quarter of an inch thick. (This thickness was commonly employed in a variety of other uses.) The fit of the early coffins was designed to be extremely snug and was custom-measured in each case. In the early 1800s, coffin lids were seldom flat, but instead were peaked.



*Fig. 2 - Coffin lids were often peaked.*

By Victorian times it became common to provide children and young girls with coffins painted white, presumably to denote their innocence. By that period, the work of making coffins (which often had windows) was more likely to be delegated to persons whose primary skills were in carpentry. Popular York Springs undertaker Anthony Deardorff used to hire the carpenter Isaac Kesselring of Biglerville to custom-make caskets and rough boxes for him as the demand arose. The Routzahn undertakers of Bendersville never had any problems procuring specialists for building coffins. As previously stated, Jonas himself was an excellent builder and ran a custom furniture business from his home, as well as serving the community's undertaking needs—this was the legacy

which he left his heirs. Quite possibly, this precise combination of careers (carpentry and undertaking) was most likely to develop into a highly successful funeral establishment.

During the height of the Victorian period, society's interest in the individual became increasingly manifest. Flat coffin lids came into vogue, and in many coffins, a glass window was placed over the area of the face. "She Is Only Sleeping" read the typical tombstone of the period. "See her sleep," the windowed coffins seemed to say. A custom-designed separate wooden panel covered the glass for the burial. Coffins were lined with padding to make them appear more bed-like, and shrouds gradually became old-fashioned. The windowed version of the coffin remained common until the modern view of death began to make substantial inroads in the burial attitudes of American society around the end of World War I.

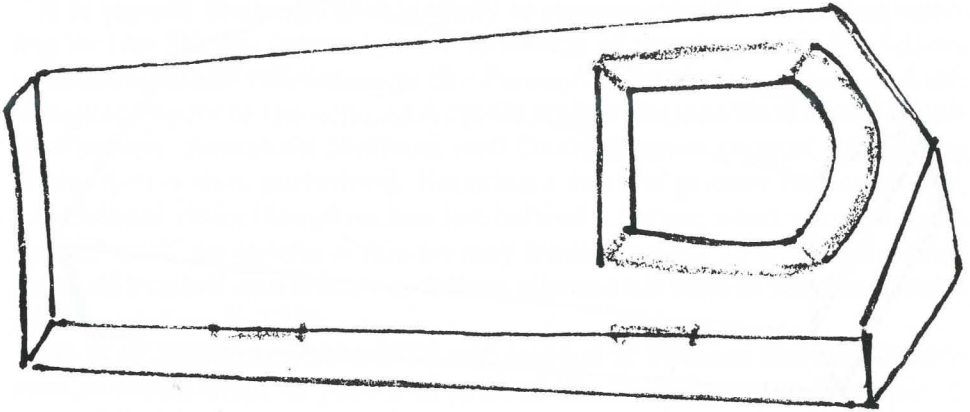


Fig. 3 - In this locally popular Victorian coffin, a separate wooden panel was used to cover the glass window just before burial.

As early as 1875, both caskets and coffins were marketed in Adams county undertaking establishments side-by-side. The casket represented modern innovation. Its design presented a new and neutral shape that was so different as to need a new word, *casket*. The casket was shaped like a large chest and had the look of a newly-purchased shiny piece of furniture. With the use of a casket, the shroud could be completely discarded since the new rectangular shape was roomy enough to require considerable padding. The bed-like effect of the padding was highly agreeable in its connotation of sleep for the departed. A familiar and popular



Victorian ideal was being espoused with this padding, while the design of the coffin's shiny outer shell had been wiped clean of death's old-fashioned and depressing stigma. James A. Hijiya summarizes the casket's significance as follows:

Even though the death-sleep connotation of the coffin's padding had been ubiquitous during Victorian decades, the new coffin shape was highly significant of the modern mind-set with regard to death. Since the turn of the century American funeral practices have sought with ever-increasing fervor to negate the pain and mystery of death by refusing to acknowledge death altogether.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, not everybody liked these new-fangled "caskets." Caskets had to coexist with the more traditional coffins for decades until they themselves had become familiar. Only then would many local people even entertain the notion of using one. According to estate records (1883) Margaret, the widow of George Group, was among the first locally buried in a casket. Her "casket, shroud, and c." totaled \$40.50, which seems a standard sum for that time. Her estate was not settled by a family member or close friend but by the lawyer "D. McConaughy."

Adams county undertaking advertisements of the 1880s specifically list "coffins" and "caskets" among the goods and services offered. As time went on, however, the two terms gradually lost their distinct connotations. Many individuals no doubt employed the terms interchangeably, even prior to the abandonment of the ancient coffin shape.

Jonas Routzahn's estate papers (1889) show an inventory of seventeen completed "coffins" and sixteen rough boxes in stock but no "caskets." The values of his coffins ranged from \$13.00 to \$2.75. In contrast to these values, a typical 1880s estate notation for "coffin &c" was in the \$50.00 range. Perhaps the "&c" items were of great value. Jonas's inventory also noted nine shrouds with prices ranging from \$3.50 to \$.50. The expense of coffin hardware and handles seems to have made up most of the difference in cost for the average local 1880s funeral. (Routzahn inventory values were probably appraised low, since both the executor and the prospective purchaser of the items were sons of Jonas.) The hardware pieces were attached after customers had specified which exact types they desired. There were Catholic and Protestant hardware emblems available, many of which had been imported from Europe. These bore traditional religious symbols.



Undertakers knew that the role of the pallbearers in a funeral was very important to the customers, i.e., generally the family. The family would choose those men who had strengthened the individual's community and family ties during life to carry the dead member to the grave. This gesture helped prolong the bonding of various factions, both among the living and with the dead. Pallbearers would use and notice those fine handles when they performed their duty. Thus, the nicer the handles, the greater the gesture of respect.

Jonas Routzahn was succeeded in the undertaking business by his son, George R., and later by his grandson, William O. Routzahn. The business is currently run by a sixth generation of family descended from Jonas, with every prospect of the succession continuing into a seventh generation.

William O. Routzahn is remembered by several of the persons interviewed for the purposes of preparing this article. Archie Guise recalls that prior to 1918 Mr. Routzahn used to order a set of ten or twelve rough boxes which would arrive at the Gardners station by freight train. He would then pick these up with his wagon and team. Mr. Guise also recalls Mr. Routzahn's driving his horse-drawn hearse past the Gardners schoolhouse. He must have been on his way to one of the Bermudian churches, for soon the children could hear a church bell toll. Mr. Guise did not start attending school at Gardners until 1917, so the horse-drawn hearse was still in local use at that time.

Rough boxes anticipated the modern cement or metal vault. No one interviewed remembered or heard tell of a time before rough boxes were used, nor did anyone report seeing a shroud or an old-style shaped coffin in use. The word *shroud*, however, was used figuratively in a local newspaper account of 1905, so that term at least was still generally meaningful to readers after the turn of the century.

All across America, the use of the hearse was offered free when one employed the services of an undertaker. This business arrangement was extremely shrewd because many people were much more interested in having the use of the fancy hearse and high-stepping, matched team than they were in having the "extras" that could be purchased with the coffin. Providing the hearse at no cost was a way of insuring that the undertaker "got your business" and could then encourage the sale of many fine funeral options.

Very few local families could boast a fine matched team of horses, for such animals were a great expense both to purchase and to maintain. However, virtually all local families appreciated a high-stepping, beautiful team. To use such transport for a family member's funeral proved

the high regard the family felt for the dead. In addition, very early on the hearse acquired a specialized wagon shape. A family wanting a funeral “conducted in a manner corresponding with their estate and station in life” simply could not substitute their own Sunday buggy for a hearse. Hearses were designed to appear expensive, thus suggesting the deceased had achieved prestige and success during his or her lifetime. In 1889, for example, the horse-drawn hearse of Jonas Routzahn was valued at \$175.00 and was the single most expensive item in the inventory.

Embalming was introduced to Adams county in 1882 by Hanson P. Mark of Arendtsville, the county’s first licensed practitioner of that skill. Gradually, this preservative measure received hesitant acceptance from the public, a hesitancy implied by some of the advertisements placed by undertakers doing business in the largest county boroughs (see first illustration). People, apparently accustomed to the idea of ice boxes, were afraid that embalming involved mutilating the dead. The inventory of Jonas Routzahn in 1889 lists two “Boddie Freezers” valued at \$1.50 and \$2.00, but no specific embalming supplies. Undertakers generally maintained supplies of ice in their spring houses packed in saw dust and straw. The body freezers used ice packed around the torso and possessed the advantage that the ice and the dead person could be arranged for viewing without fear that the melting ice would ruin preparations.

Embalming had been used much more commonly in Europe for decades but only achieved some measure of acceptance in America during the Civil War. During that crisis, the practical necessity of providing mass transport of bodies overrode philosophical concerns. Washington, D.C., was the first center of American embalming practices. Prior to 1880, embalming schools were established in large American cities. W. O. Routzahn, son of Jonas, was the first man in the rural area to receive a degree from one of these schools, reportedly in 1910. Personal interviews indicate that by 1918 professional embalming was taking place often, but that the undertaker performed this task at the family residence.

The preference of the family for remaining physically close to the one whose life was over appears to have been a need of universal and ancient origin. Folks felt a great reluctance to surrender the body of a family member to any undertaker. To have this man prepare or keep the body in his establishment seemed a very foreign notion. For Adams countians prior to 1918 or 1920 death was a fact of life—a phenomenon with which most were intimately familiar. And, except for a rural Victorian effort to shield the youngest children from the details of prepara-



tion, a family fully expected, indeed, actually hoped that bodies of family members would receive loving attentions from those who had been close in life.

The Victorian undertaker was employed to provide specific goods and services at the direction of the family. However, by this time embalming and funeral procession arrangements had become so involved that undertakers heartily wished to perform their preparations on their own turf, and they took every opportunity to influence the public to accept services that were not home-based. At the close of the period, the local undertaker had still not become a funeral director in the modern sense: the family stubbornly retained that function, and a sustained tension still existed between the "old-fashioned" and the "modern" ways of "doin' things."

## Viewings and Wakes

Following ancient folk tradition, if a person could not be present when a loved one died, the next best thing was to go to the deceased's home and see him/her before the burial. This was called "paying your respects." There were two aspects involved in these semi-formal parlor viewings. In addition to the very real need to be with the body for a final time, there was also the desire to visit with the family who had sustained the loss. Not only would one offer consolation, but one would also gain knowledge of the inner fabric of the immediate family network, the family dealings with one another and with the death itself. Alfred Delp of Idaville reports that his family traditionally held both funeral services and viewings at the family home until well after 1920. Generally, local people were intensely socially concerned beings, and family and community bonds were of paramount importance. At least one family member would generally be in attendance in the front room or parlor as long as the body was in the house.

At first, what came to be called "the viewing" at the home was not confined to any set day or time. By 1918 the custom of meeting at the house before the trip to the church and cemetery served as a formal viewing time. Many local folks remember that when the services of an undertaker were requested at a home, the undertaker would hang a special black crepe funeral wreath on the front door. The funeral wreath announced death's tidings in no uncertain terms to any would-be casual visitors.



Fig. 4 - At the close of the period black roses of twisted crepe cloth hung on front doors to announce a death within.

Ralph Hikes recalls that when his grandmother died in 1922, the family was there to help as the undertaker prepared her body in the home. He remembers their being asked to find a certain size of crock. He also recalls that the family set up a schedule so that her body was never left alone until the burial took place. He does not recall anyone using the word *wake*, the formal term for such a watch. Not only did the practice of a death watch traditionally provide a sustained period of family contact and grieving, but it also provided a practical safety check to see if the person were really dead. Premature burial was always considered a distinct possibility. In her scrap book of newspaper clippings from the 1930's, for example, Laura Group saved the printed story of a Rumanian woman who was buried alive. According to the clipping, grave-robbers unearthed the coffin, raised the lid, and ran away trembling when they heard the woman mumbling. The woman then ran home through the bitter cold and had a desperate time convincing her family to open the door to her: they thought that she was a ghost.

Given the past level of common medical knowledge, it is surely no wonder why hearing even one such story a year would be enough to maintain the tradition of the "wake"—to keep the tradition vital as long as bodies were kept in homes before burial. There is to date little documentation available concerning local wake practices, but Jessie Deatricks recalls the following in her written history of York Springs:

The next [home] was the Adam Grove place. I don't know anything about the family; but my parents told me they thought he was buried alive as steam was seen on the glass of the coffin lid.<sup>3</sup>

## Communication: Bearing Death's Tidings

When a death occurred, family and friends had to be notified at once. Ralph Hikes recalls working in the fields, hearing the church bell toll, and wondering who had died. In his Upper Bermudian congregation, a grieving family would hasten to inform the sexton, who would in turn hasten to toll the bell each time a death occurred. Family members who lived near and far made every effort to attend funeral gatherings. The post bore the sad news with black-edged mourning card announcements in the decades around 1900. Some local families were not interested in the look of their death announcements and used plain postcards, with messages scrawled in pencil to serve the purpose.

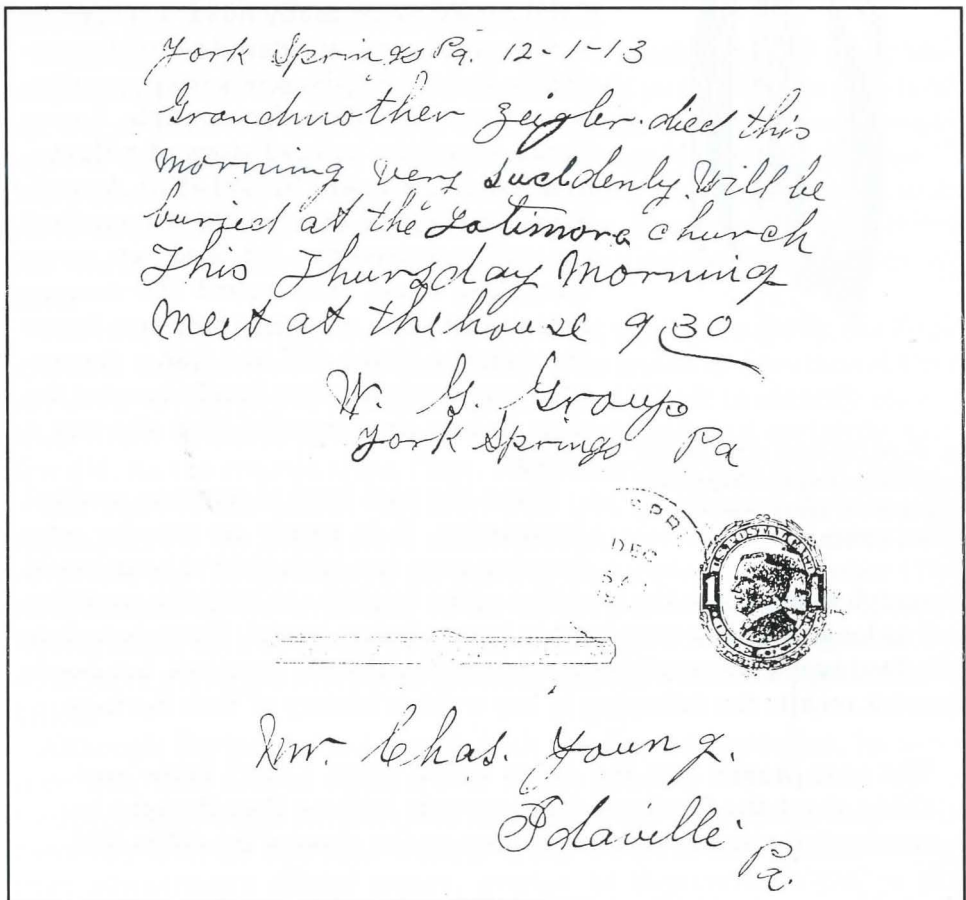


Fig. 5



Throughout the period, the content of a newspaper obituary was not standardized as it is today. Before 1880, it was not even standardized practice to have an obituary printed for each family member. However, by 1918 the newspaper obituary had assumed the duty of informing others of the death so that they might be able to attend the funeral service. The obituary of Eliza June Slusser in 1918 clearly states that "friends and family are to take this as announcement of the death," implying that they could then make plans to attend the service which was scheduled a day or two after the article appeared. In later instances, the names of the pallbearers were even printed in the newspaper in order to notify the men that they had been chosen for this duty. Apparently, the arrival of the telephone took some of the strain from the post and the newspaper because the phone could instantly bring individuals news of a personal nature.

Often, the newspaper played another role in the common experience of death in a family. Not only did some families employ it to announce a pending funeral service, but perhaps as commonly, they used the newspaper to print a poem expressing their grief and usually their faith in God. They frequently selected a pre-composed poem, then signed their names to the poem to indicate that the lyric expressed their own sentiments. Locally, the use of these poems dates back to the advent of the Victorian era and lasted into the 1920's. The following poem was placed in the *Compiler* (April 2) by Mr. and Mrs. George Wiedner on the occasion of the death of three of their children of scarlet fever in 1901:

Dearest children, thou hast left us.  
Still thy loss we deeply feel  
But this God who hast bereft us  
He will all our sorrows heal.

Yet again we hope to meet thee.  
When the day of life is fled;  
And with joy in heaven to greet thee,  
Where no farewell tear is shed.

Frequently, poems such as this were placed in the paper on the anniversary of a person's death.

Local Victorian styles of gravestones carried the same poems which folks choose to have printed in the newspapers. These particular gravestones with their engraved poems lost popularity after 1900, but the lyrics continued to appear in newsprint for at least another 20 years.



## On Funeral Day

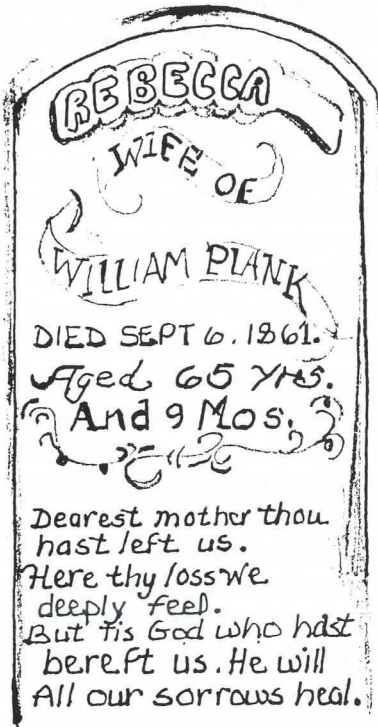


Fig. 6

There seems to have been a standard sequence of events governing the activities of the actual day of the funeral.

Funeral gatherings generally began at the home of the family. Sometimes there was a formal service at the home itself. From there, mourners generally rode with the coffin in a procession to the church for a sit-down service. Then they moved outside to the grave site and finally returned to the family home again—this time for a less formal gathering, complete with a nourishing meal. After the meal, the will, if any, was read to an assembly of those mentioned therein.

Perhaps the funeral service sometimes took place after the interment, as in the case of Reverend John Barnhart, a small-pox victim who was buried in extreme haste.<sup>4</sup> However, no one interviewed was able to confirm this as a fact. The earliest local funeral service of which there is

substantial record is that of Mr. Thomas Wood of Philadelphia, who died while on a visit to York Sulphur Springs in 1813. This service seems to have been rather a grim affair:

A very desolate looking old grave yard is still seen surrounding the spot where "Christ Church, Huntington" once stood, in all about four acres, which still belongs to the remnant of the congregation. The enclosure or grave yard proper contains an area of from 1/2 to 3/4 of an acre, and is quite full of graves. The earliest graves were marked by common flat stones, set at head and foot. The oldest lettered stone is a common sandstone, and marks the grave of William Field, of whom there was a tradition that he shot a bear which had hold of his brother—killing the bear, but not injuring the man. The first marble stone in this yard marks the grave of Thomas Wood, of Philadelphia, who died at York Sulphur Springs in July, 1813. There were at that time no facili-

ties for transporting coffins—hence he was compelled to be buried in this obscure place, far from kindred, none of whom perhaps ever visited his grave. The only mourner present was a son, apparently about sixteen years of age, who, after the services were over, walked sadly up to the grave, and gathered a handful of the dust—the last relic of his departed father. The funeral sermon was preached by old Dr. Campbell, from the text “Oh that they were wise, that they understood this, that they would consider their latter end.” This was the last time the old gentleman entered that pulpit. These old grave stones are becoming covered with moss; but still erect and in good condition, although tended by no affectionate hand.<sup>5</sup>

The family of Mrs. Helen Kennedy of Gardners handed down the memory of another rather depressing early funeral. According to tradition, Rock Chapel had one of the “wateriest graveyards ‘round abouts.” During one rainy period, the mourners were having a funeral (perhaps of one of the many Sadlers buried there) and it was pouring. While some attended the service inside, others were busy outside bailing out the pre-dug grave which kept filling up with water.

A funeral service commonly contained all the substance of a standard church service, complete with congregational singing. A broad selection of funeral texts was also in use.

The attendance of the community at funeral services in the past was proportionally far greater than today. For example, vivacious school girl Laura Group attended at least 19 funerals in 1895, according to her notebook. She recorded 19 funeral texts in her notebook in that year. Sometimes, the number of persons attending a funeral served as a gauge of the deceased’s significance within the community. Sometimes, a large attendance was due to other community interests. Local newspapers took notice of large crowds at a funeral: a gathering of 300 - 500 was newsworthy. In the case of the funeral of soldier Frank E. Gardner who died in 1918, a newspaper clipping announced that 500 people had assembled at the “Idaville Evangelical Church” for the military funeral. The attraction seems to have been that this was a military funeral; however, the Gardners were also a well-respected family within the community.

According to the notes of the pastor of the Upper Bermudian Church, more than 500 people attended some funerals. Funerals of suicide victims usually attracted very large crowds since the strong cultural taboos against suicide spawned tinges of perverse curiosity about such events.



Until services began to be held at the funeral director's parlor (after 1920), it seems that funeral services generally took place at church, at home, or at the grave-site; sometimes at all three. An infant's burial more frequently took place only at the grave site.

The use of flowers in funeral services is hard to document before the close of the period. Pennsylvania-German ladies have always been noted for their cultivation of flowers. From tulip to rose, gravestones throughout the period bear tribute to the people's love of these brief-lived, yet beautiful symbols of life and association with death. Jessie Deatrick's history of York Springs is sprinkled with references to various ladies who cared for large collections of transplanted wild and cultivated flowers along their white Victorian picket fences. Laura Group spoke of decorating the Evangelical United Brethren churches of Cline's and Mount Tabor for special evening services. Local women who came to take pride in their flower collections often became involved in decorating the area's churches, according to the season. Just when and how often flowers were used in decor for funeral services are unknown, but one may assume considerable individual variation in the practice prior to 1920. After 1920 Gettysburg borough undertakers sometimes listed "flowers" on their itemized funeral bills. The first florist of the locale appears to have been Mrs. Nina Houck Kuntz who began a greenhouse in Biglerville in 1943. Pastor Biles of the Lutheran charge centered in Bendersville finds it remarkable that today local people prefer such a large profusion of floral bouquets at funeral services.

Ralph Hikes possesses a wealth of information about traditional behavior at a local church funeral service. The customs he discussed were so firmly entrenched in generations-old tradition that no living Adams countian seems to be able to remember ever hearing a rationale for them.

As is the case in local church funerals today, family members would all be seated to the right of the aisle, facing the casket. The closest relatives would be seated in the front row, with the parents or wife or husband on the inside end of the aisle. Mr. Hikes also recalled that friends would be seated on the left-hand side of the church.

It was customary to wear black to a funeral. In a local church service, ladies wore coats, gloves and hats with added black veils. Men wore hats, jackets and overcoats. Men kept these hats, jackets, and overcoats on while they sat in the pews for the duration of the service, regardless of the heat.

Generally, the casket would be open for the duration of the service. As it concluded, there would be a great wailing and moaning as the closest family members themselves closed up the casket, with the whole assem-

bly of folks looking on. (Today the funeral director performs this duty, and it is done in private.) Then the closest family members symbolically surrendered the casket to the pallbearers. These more distant family members and friends carried the casket to the grave. Everyone followed, and there would be a shorter grave-side ceremony which concluded with everyone walking away after the final prayer.

Lowering the casket into the ground and filling in the grave were done immediately after the close of the service, after the family had left the graveyard to return to the home-place for refreshment and socializing. Mr. Hikes' statements about funerals dating back to 1920 have been substantiated by many elder Adams countians.

Estate papers after 1840 fail to detail the kind or amount of foods and drinks served following the service. It appears that those who authorized the preparations for these gatherings were the executors, who were often also family members. The various expenditures incurred for a funeral were added together and listed as one amount next to the executor's name. An exception to this is found in the estate of B. F. Slusser (d. 1918): "\$10.00" designated to Laura Group for "funeral expenses." Laura Group was a daughter but not an executrix. An interview with Laura's daughter confirmed that Laura had supplied all the food (\$10.00 could buy a great quantity of food in 1918).

Before 1840 it is possible to find an occasional estate entry that specifically notes the type of drink used in the post-funeral gathering. The estate of a John Bender (d. 1816 and buried at Bender's Church) records the following expenses: "Coffin . . . \$8.00, Whiskey . . . \$4.00"—considerable money at a time when a local farm laborer earned but 20 cents a day. The availability of a quantity of alcohol at a funeral could signify the prestige of the deceased and also of the family, just as alcohol (and food) does at a wedding today. In his 1992 history of Adams county, Dr. Robert L. Bloom commented on the pre-temperance social function of liquor: "In the decades before the Civil War, Americans of all classes and sections consumed prodigious quantities of alcoholic drink. It was said that they indulged on all occasions and even between occasions."<sup>6</sup> Just what types of foods and drinks were served at funeral gatherings may have been important to those who attended, but Adams county wills seldom specify any precise arrangements.

In 1918, while Isabel Group recalled a full funeral meal with several kinds of meat and pie, Ralph Hikes recalled lighter fare—rice pudding with bananas and the traditional Pennsylvania-Dutch raisin pie. Raisin pie was sometimes locally called "funeral pie." It was considered a treat because raisins were very expensive, and the pie was reserved for spe-



cial occasions, one of which would have been a funeral gathering.

Despite the lack of available detail, it is apparent that Adams countians considered the post-service gathering at the home an essential component of a proper funeral. Wills were read or plans for dispersal of property were made at the home after the meal. Several wills throughout the period specify that the will be produced and read at the family home after the funeral had taken place. The following quotation is from the will of Levi Hutton, penned April 11, 1838:

F. Keener is to keep this will in his possession until after my demise so long as he is a resident of this county To read it to the heirs at my house [or] upon his leaving this county to leave this will with [illegible].

Often, it is very touching to note the special concern which a will-maker put into making arrangements for the loved ones he hoped would survive him. Husbands commonly asked that their wives be supplied with firewood, chopped and brought "sufficient for their needs." John Bender (d. 1816) specified that his wife not only have the wood but also that she own the stove in which to burn it. Old bones "minded the cold" with advancing years, it was said. In his will, Levi Hutton went to great length to provide for a handicapped son, perhaps implying why he so earnestly desired that his will be read in a timely manner.

The reading of the will on funeral day completed all the essential practical and emotional tasks that comprised a funeral 1800-1920.

## Summary

Surveyed in totality, the funeral practices of northeast Adams county, 1800-1920, reveal a lack of standardization akin to that observed in the many other cultural areas. Rural Adams county funeral practices lagged decades behind those of large American cities. Local people were more likely to dispense with the more ostentatious aspects of stylish funeral etiquette (for instance, the black-edged mourning cards) and to stress instead the family's emotional needs and expressions. Additionally, the lack of standardization seems to have been linked with meager economic resources as well as with the level of personal involvement which the grieving family strove to maintain, a personal involvement with the dead person who had left their midst as well as an involvement with the extended family and community.

## Appendix

### Individual Profiles Which Pertain to "Funeral Practices"

*The following are excerpts from the report lodged at the Adams County Historical Society. This section traces the lives of a number of individuals who lived in upper north-east Adams county for the majority of the years of their lives. Subjects were chosen from a cross-section of heterogeneous groupings.*

*Sources consulted were the same that figure in the rest of the report: wills and estate papers, church records, obituaries, gravestone descriptions and inscriptions, diaries, letters, and personal interviews.*

\* \* \* \*

#### A.

#### Eliza Jane Murtoff Slusser, 1839-1918

Eliza Jane Murtoff Slusser of Mt. Tabor was the mother of two sons and four daughters, all of whom lived to attain adulthood. She was the wife of Benjamin Franklin Slusser, a farmer and Civil War veteran.

Daughter Laura Group (d. 1972) recalled that her mother was a Sunday school teacher at Mt. Tabor United Brethren Church. She also recalled that after the family got their organ in the parlor, in 1896, "Mother would come into the room whenever we were playing and sing the alto to 'Near My God to Thee' and 'Jesus, Lover of my Soul.'"

According to the memory of Eliza Jane's granddaughter, Isabel Group (d. 1990), when Eliza and her husband, B. Franklin, were in ill health in the late fall of 1917 their eldest son, John, brought the two aging parents to the home of his sister Laura and announced that they were to stay with her father for the winter for health reasons. John had not discussed this plan with Laura or her husband prior to his action. As the winter progressed the two needed increasing assistance.

One day, as Isabel, a first grader, was walking home from school she was startled by the report of a neighbor woman who lived up the road: "Isabel, your grandma's dead. Your grandma just died." She hurried home and found this to be true. She remembers seeing her grandma's body laid out on the cot where she had slept. She remembers being kept out of the room during some sort of preparations and remembers the arrival of all her mother's brothers and sisters at the house, even Aunt Vi, who was well-to-do and lived at a distance and was thus seldom seen. Little



Isabel did not go to the church service, nor did her grandpa, who could not walk.

Wife Fatally Stricken while Attending her Sick Husband.

May 7 1418  
Mrs. Eliza Jane Slusser, wife of B. S. Slusser, of Mt. Tabor, died very suddenly at the home of her daughter, Mrs. Charles Group, Gardners Station, on Monday afternoon at 1:45 o'clock. Her husband has been ill for about a year and as she was giving him his dinner she fell over and died ten minutes later. She was aged 79 years and 23 days.

Mrs. Slusser was a daughter of the late Moses and Elizabeth Murtorff, of Mt. Tabor.

She leaves her husband and the following sons and daughters: William Slusser and Mrs. William Murtorff, of Gardners Station; John Slusser, of Newark, N.J.; Mrs. William Seton, Wyncote, Pa.; Mrs. Charles Group, Gardners Station; and Mrs. John Deardorff, of Boswell; also sixteen grandchildren and five great-grandchildren.

She also leaves the following brothers: William Murtorff, Reading; John Murtorff, Gardners; Lewis Murtorff, Bendersville; and Albert Murtorff, Boiling Springs. She was a member of the Mt. Tabor United Brethren church.

The funeral services will be held on Thursday morning, meeting at the home of her daughter, Mrs. Charles Group, Gardners, at 10 o'clock. Services and interment at Mt. Tabor United Brethren church, Rev. Charles Gardner officiating.

Friends and relatives will please take this as notice of the funeral.

Fig. 7 - A copy of part of Eliza Jean's obituary saved by her family.

Isabel recalls the open casket being brought over to her grandfather's chair right before the people left with it for the church. "My grandfather looked sorrowfully down at her body and reached out to touch her hand with a very soulful expression on his face. All the family were looking on and Aunt Vi said, 'Oh, It'll kill the man!' Aunt Vi seemed to be the outspoken one of the family. It felt as though her comment at that time was not appreciated. My Grandfather said nothing."

Laura Group recorded the text Genesis 23:2 used by Reverend Gardner for her mother's service: "Sarah died, and Abraham mourned for her."

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## Personal Recollections of Funeral Practices

by Isabel P. Group (1918)

\*\*\*\*

When my grandpa died several months after Grandma, his death was not unexpected. He had gangrene in his leg and he was in a great deal of pain all the time. He had gotten very frail and small. The bullet in his shoulder from his Civil War injury had always troubled him, but it was nothing compared with the pain of the gangrene.

At any rate, when he died, and after we children saw him still and quiet, my father went to the shop (Dad was a carpenter/plaster by trade) and got a long, wide board. He brought this into the main room where Grandpa had had his bed while he was staying with us, and where he had died. He placed Grandpa's body on the board. My mother proceeded to wash Grandpa's body and arrange his features. She shaved him also at that time and then dressed him in his good suit, which of course looked very big on him. When the undertaker [W. O. Routzahn] arrived, I was not allowed in the room, but the adults were.

I remember that there was again much discussion as to whether or not all of mother's brothers and sisters would come for the funeral. Of course, they all did come. It was quite a to-do getting ready for them, and mother had had all the care of nursing the aged parents as well as the first funeral a few months before. Mother managed to prepare everything very efficiently, including all sorts of meats and foods to serve after the service. We all helped her and did as we were told; still we were aware that there were extraordinary responsibilities involved with getting ready for this funeral.

I don't remember going to the service itself, as I was only eight years old; perhaps I didn't go.

After the supper when it came time for the reading of the will, the adults assembled in the front room. I didn't remember anything about this, but my mother talked about it with me later when I was grown up. It seems that mother had vividly remembered what transpired as the will was read because her oldest brother John questioned her about the cash that their father had with him when he died. This question offended Laura who felt it was an insult to her integrity. "I think she should keep the money," interrupted Aunt Vi. No one seemed to pay any attention to Vi. My mother, Laura, took the cash out of her pocket (it was about \$100.00) and quickly traversed the space between her chair and John's. She pushed the money into his hand and told him that if he had to ask he'd better keep it himself . . . and he did!

\* \* \* \*

**B.**

### **Ralph Hikes 1914-**

Ralph Hikes is a semi-retired farmer and local historian who has lived in Huntington township all his life. He is the son of the late Elmer H.

Hikes and Elsie C. Bream. He was raised within the congregation of the Upper Bermudian Lutheran Church and has held various church and cemetery board positions since youth. Currently, Ralph is active in many organizations of a historical and benevolent nature. He is a charter member of the York Springs Historical Society and a member of the Adams County Historical Society. His wife is the lovely Mary E. (Betty) Lier Hikes. The couple has raised three children: Carl L., Saverna Forest, Md.; Alice M. Hikes, York Springs; and Martha J. Muratsuka, Hawaii.

Ralph's recollections of funeral practices in upper north-east Adams county form an integral part of "Funeral Practices." His information is a composite formed by attending many, many funerals held mostly at his local church. In addition, he recalls the family preparations for the service of his grandmother, Caroline Meals Fissel, who died in 1922. It is certainly noteworthy that most of Ralph's memories date from about 1918. The consistency of local customs begun prior to that date is thus extended past it through the 1920s.

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## **Personal Recollection, Bell-Tolling at Local Churches**

by Ralph Hikes

\* \* \* \*

The last time I recall of our Upper Bermudian church bell tolling was to observe the bicentennial celebration in 1976. Church bells used to be used for all sorts of occasions, weddings, deaths, the Fourth of July, Christmas. . . . Now it seems that the custom has slackened off.

Different ones that lived near our church complained about the sound of the bell—it used to ring a half hour before services on Sunday mornings—said their sleep was disturbed. So we finally quit using the bell altogether.

There was a custom we had for funerals—not only did we toll the bell when there was news of someone having died, but on the day of the funeral the bell ringer would start to toll the bell from the tower as soon as he could see the hearse coming over the rise in the road.

When I was a boy at home I could hear the different church bells from the different directions—York Springs, Idaville, Upper Bermudian. Each bell had its own tone. When it was damp sometimes the sounds would really carry. It was pleasant to expect the sound of the bells on Sunday mornings.



### NOTES

1. Gettysburg *Compiler*, 11 June 1889.
2. Cited in William M. Lamers and Robert W. Habenstein, *History of American Funeral Directing* (Milwaukee, 1955), p. 61.
3. Jessie Deatrick, "Memories of York Springs" (unpublished manuscript, 1967), p. 7.
4. *Compiler*, 9 Jan. 1903.
5. John T. Reily, *History and Directory of the Boroughs of Adams County* (Gettysburg, Pa., 1880), p. 95.
6. Robert L. Bloom, *A History of Adams County, Pennsylvania, 1700-1990*, (Gettysburg, Pa., 1992), p. 133.