

Death in the Home

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Prior to the institution of funeral homes at the beginning of the twentieth century, death was a far more personal experience for the family members of the deceased. During the mid to late nineteenth century, the dead were displayed within the home where they had died. Immediately following death, the body was cleaned and dressed to prepare for the funeral week- a period of time that facilitated the process of grieving for the immediate family as their loved one remained in their presence for several days. In many instances, the attending nurse or a family servant dressed the body, as both were present at the time of death. Dressing the body had to be done immediately after death as the body began to decay quickly, beginning with the onset of rigor mortis. This video is an interpretation of the process of dressing a body immediately after death. Due to the lack of primary resources in the King's County area, this video is based on secondary sources from the mid to late nineteenth century and in areas like the American South and England. Although this research is not grounded in the area, one can presume that body-dressing practices elsewhere during the same time period were similar to those practiced in King's County.

Slide 1: The Funeral Week

- Before the institution of funeral homes near the end of the nineteenth century, death in the family was a far more personal and demanding event than it is today.
- Whereas sickness and death most often occur in hospitals and funeral homes today, the family home was once where the majority of people battled sickness and eventually died.
- Immediately following death, the body needed to be dressed immediately in order to properly clean and display the dead before the onset of rigor mortis.
- Following the dressing of the body, the deceased was displayed within the parlor for up to a week, hence the term 'Funeral Parlor.' Much like today's version of a 'wake,' the funeral week allowed family and loved ones to pay their respects to the dead within the home.
- By having the body in the home, the grieving process was much more intense and personal as the deceased loved one was still in the home. Many argue that this helped the healing process as it allowed the time for the family members to come to terms with death.
- Following the actual funeral ceremony, which occurred at the end of the funeral week, an undertaker transported the body to the burial site and was paid a fee for his efforts. The Borden family's undertaking records describe many transactions that involved the transportation of a body to the cemetery.

Slide 2: Film: The Dressing of the Body

-For my part of the class display, I chose to re-enact the actual dressing of the body that occurred immediately after death.

1. Tying the jaw and closing the eyes: This was done immediately following death in order to position the face before the onset of rigor mortis.

2. Straightening the limbs: Also done to position the body before rigor mortis.

3. Cleaning the body: obviously the makes sure the body was clean before the arrival of visitors.

4. Wrapping the waist to the thighs.

5. Plugging of all bodily orifices with clean rags

6. Tying feet together.

7. Combing the hair and crossing the arms in order to properly present the body.

Slide 3: Challenges

-Due to a lack of primary resources in the King's County area, most of my presentation is based on secondary sources from the United States and England during the same time period.

-In the university archives, I examined sources diaries and histories of the Anapolis valley and Wolfville area but was unable to find any usable information with the exception of Borden's undertaking records, which only detailed the prices of a coffin and transporting a body from the home to the cemetery.

-Marie Ann Norris's diary was a minister's daughter and helped with funeral arrangements in the area, however there were not descriptions of her duties or any details regarding dressing the body.

-Finding materials that fit the time period. While the waist and thighs of the body was wrapped in Calico material, the best I had at my disposal was elastic athletic bandages.

-Costumes: Hard to find costumes to accurately portray the time period. The best I could do was an old dress that appeared to resemble a nineteenth century dress.

-Actors, as you may have seen, I had to play the dead body. It proved difficult to find people that were willing or able to lay still for an extended period of time and pretend they were dead.

-Technology: I had never made a movie on the computer before and wasn't even aware that I had the program to do so. So that was a learning experience, but now I would pretty much consider myself an expert film-maker.

Slide 4: Contribution to class display and public history

-I believe my presentation gave insight into the funeral practices that existed before the institution of funeral homes, as there is little data available on this time period in the area.

-As my research went on, the importance of funeral homes in taking some of the burden off of the family became more and more apparent. With the institution of funeral homes, families were able to grieve without the emotional challenge of remaining in proximity to the body for the funeral week.

-I believe my film gave some depth and variety to the group project and complimented the other students' displays.