

Last Rites



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The Dark Arts

An Introduction

We die. We're embalmed. We're waked. There's public notification. The community comes together for a service, then we're burned or buried. This is the American funeral.

Our death rituals, like all things American, are unique to the culture, but they share connective tissue with the far corners of the globe dating to antiquity. These often strange rituals, and by extension the men and women plying the dark arts, are almost as mysterious as death itself. *Last Rites* lifts the curtain and offers a glimpse of why we bury our dead the way we do.

The American funeral rite coalesced in a single moment involving a marble-sized piece of metal.

Ever since the first permanent settlement was established at Jamestown, the American death rite was a simple, austere event, borrowing heavily from English burial traditions. The remains were washed and dressed at home. A local cabinetmaker furnished a custom-made coffin, and the remains were carried by hand and immediately buried in the town's commons or on family land. The family and townsfolk gathered for the repast, and the funeral service was delivered after the burial.

Overnight, the tectonic plates shifted.

A seventeen-gram lump of Britannia metal—about the weight of an AAA battery—forever altered the American funeral experience, at least once John Wilkes Booth loaded it into his derringer and fired it into President Lincoln's head.

Lincoln's death was merely the catalyst for brewing changes coming on the heels of the Civil War's turmoil. A nation was in intense mourning, grieving its 650,000 dead sons. But there were other, external pressures being put on the old funeral traditions. Population centers were exploding, America was building its infrastructure, and the Industrial Revolution—put into overdrive by the recent war—was luring Americans off their farms and into cities and factories. Americans were more mobile, goods were becoming cheaper and more plentiful, and Americans were outsourcing the care of their sick . . . and their dead.

However, the thing that set America on a unique trajectory, casting off the vestiges of the old ways from across the Atlantic, was embalming. During the war, embalming surgeons had been practicing the new sanitary science of embalming, an archaic anatomical technique imported from Europe, thrust into the spotlight by necessity—for shipment purposes—and legitimized by Lincoln himself. Lincoln ordered the embalming of his good friend and former law clerk Colonel Elmer E. Ellsworth after he was killed during the war, and was so astounded by the results that when his beloved son Willie died of typhoid, he had him embalmed as well. This progression of events made it such that when Lincoln was martyred, it was only natural that Mary Todd Lincoln had him prepared the same way, thus thrusting this obscure wartime technology into the face of a nation.

An astounding 880,000 Americans cast their eyes upon the martyred president, a feat that hasn't been surpassed in a single untelevised funeral since, thanks to the newly adopted sanitary science of embalming. It was nothing short of a miracle, and it set the stage for the American funeral.

In the next three and a half decades leading up to the end of the century, the pieces fell into place. Factories started churning out ready-made caskets, replacing the old tradesman undertaker making coffins in his workshop; hearses morphed into specialized vehicles; extravagant floral displays became *de rigueur*; and the fear of body snatching led to the advent of the burial vault. In a sleepy little town in western Pennsylvania, a man built a personal crematorium. And Americans shifted the care of their sick and dead from the home to institutional settings such as hospitals and funeral parlors. From this vacuum stepped the funeral director, a man (almost always a man in those times) versed in all the necessities needed to properly get someone in the ground.

One such man, James White, was a cabinetmaker in rural Milford, Delaware. My great-great-great-grandfather.

I've been plying the dark arts my entire professional career, and have found that people tend to view undertakers with suspicion: *Who would choose to work in death and misery?* Sure there's grief and sorrow and pain at a funeral. Sometimes a lot. Sometimes enough for a lifetime. But there's something else if one does it right: closure. Not closure in the sense of "that's done with and I can move on" but rather in that the instinctual need to care for our dead brethren has been fulfilled: the dead are where they need to be. With that closure comes hope—the hope to find the way forward. It's the same hope found at other rites—baptisms and weddings—but without the accompanying joy.

There's that old adage about asking a barber if you need a haircut. The same goes for asking the undertaker about needing a funeral. But I hope these pages make clear we're not here to sell you anything—the rituals surrounding the burial of the dead have been around long before the occupation.

The idea for this book came to me after reading David Oshinsky's *Bellevue: Three Centuries of Medicine and Mayhem at America's Most Storied Hospital*. Oshinsky made the story of a hospital—and in the same sense, the men and women who pioneered modern medicine—leap off the page for a layperson. Nothing like that has been done for funeral service. I find when I'm in mixed company and someone finds out what I do for a living, the questions start, and it's not because I have anything particularly interesting to say but rather people are honestly curious about the dead and the events and people surrounding them. So, I thought I'd break down the story of the American funeral and answer *the* questions: Why do we embalm? Why casket and not shroud, or vice versa? Where did the practice of cremation come from? Why is it customary to send flowers to a funeral? The aim is to demystify our death rituals and maybe make funerals a less intimidating experience.

An article from a funeral trade magazine, *The Casket*, a century and a half ago sums up well the historic underpinnings of the funeral: "The human family have in all ages found it imperatively necessary, if not gratifying, to bury or burn their dead, and have naturally sought to rob the unpleasant task of its most disagreeable features. The embalming process

of the Egyptians, the cremating practices of the Romans, and the burial customs of other nations all attested to the existence of a sentiment that had reference to the affections and sympathies of the living as well as the character and the future of the dead.”¹



CHAPTER 1

A Seismic Shift

Lincoln and the New Sanitary Science

It was Good Friday, 1865, and Mary Todd Lincoln was vacillating between *Aladdin!* playing at Grover's Theatre or actress Laura Keene's one thousandth performance as the lead in *Our American Cousin*. *Aladdin!* had added a rousing patriotic grand finale and thus she was torn. Mrs. Lincoln decided she and her husband would attend Keene's millesimal, and last, performance at Ford's Theatre.

It would prove to be a fateful decision.

The Lincolns and their entourage arrived late to Ford's Theatre, and the actors paused so the orchestra could play "Hail to the Chief." Everyone then settled in to watch the comedic play. After intermission, Lincoln's bodyguard, John F. Parker, inexplicably decided to go next door to the Star Saloon for a drink. The state box was left completely unguarded. During the third act, a Confederate sympathizer and well-known actor, John Wilkes Booth,* entered the dimly lit state box and shot President

* This being a funeral book, it is pertinent to add that Booth's body was buried under the Old Penitentiary storeroom floor. The remains were moved in 1867 and reburied at the Arsenal. In 1869, President Andrew Johnson released Booth's remains to John H. Weaver, a sexton undertaker, from Baltimore. He was casketed in a mahogany casket designed by Weaver and moved to a holding vault in Green Mount Cemetery, Baltimore. On June 26, 1869, Booth was interred. Terry Alford, *Fortune's Fool: The Life of John Wilkes Booth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 323–31.

Lincoln in the head. A .44 caliber ball plowed through seven and a half inches of the president's brain tissue, coming to rest behind his right eye.¹ Booth leaped onstage, yelled "*Sic semper tyrannis*,"* adding "The South is avenged!" and put events in motion for a funeral that forever changed the way Americans bury their dead.²

Charles Augustus Leale, a young surgeon just months out of Bellevue Hospital Medical College, was in the audience at Ford's Theatre and immediately rushed to tend the wounded president. After an examination in the dim state box, Leale offered his prognosis: the president was alive but mortally wounded. Not believing Lincoln was stable enough for a journey to the White House, Leale ordered him moved across the street to a boarding house.

For the next nine hours Lincoln's medical team toiled in vain at the Petersen House. He died at 7:22 a.m. on April 15.

Mary Todd Lincoln was delirious with grief.

A nation was stunned.

What happened next with President Lincoln's body—preparation by the new sanitary science of embalming—was a novel precedent set by Lincoln himself four years prior during the infancy of the war when Colonel Elmer E. Ellsworth was killed.

Ellsworth was the poster boy of a young American hero. With dashing good looks, Ellsworth was an attorney and had commanded a company of National Guard cadets in Illinois. In an 1861 portrait, Ellsworth stands with his hand on his hip, campaign cap perched at a jaunty angle over a head of curly hair, eyes intently focused on something behind the camera. It's the portrait of a man destined for greatness.

The day after Virginia seceded from the Union, May 24, 1861, Ellsworth led the Eleventh New York Volunteers into Alexandria. They encountered no resistance until Ellsworth entered Marshall House, an inn, to take down the massive Confederate battle flag, so big it could be seen from the White House.³ After removing the flag, innkeeper James Jackson shot Ellsworth at point-blank range with a shotgun. He was killed instantly.

* Not only is "thus always to tyrants" the Virginia state motto but that phrase would've appealed to Booth, a Shakespearean actor, because it is the shortened version of what Brutus reportedly said after assassinating Julius Caesar: *Sic semper evellō mortem tyrannis*, or "Thus always I cause the death of tyrants."

Ellsworth had clerked for President Lincoln in Springfield, Illinois, and accompanied him to Washington in 1861. Lincoln, through the urging of the secretary of state, commissioned Thomas Holmes, an embalming surgeon, to embalm Ellsworth.⁴ The procedure took place at the Washington Navy Yard.⁵ Holmes's secret embalming fluid, "Innominata," was likely used to prepare Ellsworth.

Lincoln ordered that Colonel Ellsworth be laid out in the East Room where Mrs. Lincoln was quite taken with how well the dead soldier looked, despite a traumatic injury that would've rendered normal remains unviewable in a short time due to decomposition. She remarked that Ellsworth appeared "natural, as though he were only sleeping."⁶ Ellsworth was subsequently conveyed back to New York City (en route to his eventual burial in Mechanicville) where thousands of mourners lined the streets to welcome home the fallen hero.

It was the visage of Ellsworth that was on Mary Todd Lincoln's mind when scarcely nine months later a calamity rocked the White House. At 5:00 p.m. on February 20, 1862, the Lincolns' third son, William Wallace, "Willie," succumbed to typhoid fever and died. The president, sitting vigil at his bedside, cried, "My poor boy, he was too good for this earth. God has called him home!"

The firm of Brown & Alexander Surgeons and Embalmers of 523 D Street N., was summoned to preserve the Lincolns' precious child. Henry Pratt Cattell, the stepson of Dr. Charles Brown, performed the embalming.⁷ Cattell, twenty-three years old, was unlike many of the embalmers working at the time in that he had no previous medical training.*

Willie was laid out in the Green Room in a plain metallic coffin wearing what the Washington *Evening Star* described as "the usual every-day attire of youths his age, consisting of pants and jacket with white stockings and low shoes—the white collar and wristbands being turned over the black cloth of the jacket."⁸ His right hand clutched a small bouquet of camellia and azaleas.⁹ The mirrors in the reception rooms of the White House were draped† in appropriate mourning: black crepe over the frames and white crepe over the glass.¹⁰

* Cattell would go on to have a long career with the District of Columbia's Metropolitan Police. He was buried December 10, 1915, in Congressional Cemetery.

† This Victorian-era custom seems to be rooted in the superstition that the deceased's spirit couldn't be allowed to "see" they were dead and thus their spirit would be free to leave.

At no time in history had the presidency of the Union been more uncertain, assaulted by external and internal forces. The nation was torn apart by civil war, Jefferson Davis having just been inaugurated as the Confederacy's president, and based on the resolve shown by Confederates during the previous summer's campaigns, it promised not to be a short war. At home, the Lincolns had already endured the loss of a son, Edward, a decade prior. Tad, their youngest, lay sick with typhoid fever—possibly dying too*—upstairs in the White House, and the president's wife, overcome with grief, had sequestered herself.

At 2:00 p.m. the Reverend Dr. Phineas Gurley, pastor of New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, led the assembled family and government officials in a service. Afterward, two white horses† pulled the hearse, leading the funeral cortege through the frigid winter evening to Oak Hill Cemetery, located off R Street in Georgetown. Willie's coffin was entombed in the Carroll family vault. William Thomas Carroll, a clerk in the Supreme Court, loaned the vault space to the Lincolns until they could take their child's body back to Illinois.

Lincoln would often visit his son's crypt in the ensuing years, and he "requested the coffin be opened on at least two occasions."¹¹ The president sat for hours perched on the granite bench, the weight of the nation pressing down on his broad shoulders, and talked to his son. His words echoed off the stone walls dug into the hillside as he peered at the tiny form nestled in the metallic enclosure. The impulse of the living is to touch the hand of the dead, and it's not a far stretch to imagine the president patting the hand of his beloved son and smoothing his hair, maybe even providing fresh flowers for young Willie's hands.

Three years and two months after Willie's death, a grief-stricken Mrs. Lincoln once again called upon the services of Brown & Alexander Surgeons and Embalmers and Henry Cattell.

The president's body was returned to the White House directly from the Petersen House under the direction of Frank T. Sands, the government

* Tad recovered.

† Typically, white horses were used to denote the deceased was a woman or child, and black horses for men. (Sometimes it was the color of the hearse itself, if the undertaker was wealthy enough to have several hearses.) This tradition is correlated to weepers, or mourning armbands. White weepers meant the death of a woman or child in the family; black were for men.

undertaker, and taken to the guest room located on the second floor in the northwest corner for preparation.¹²

Nine men were in attendance for the cranial autopsy, including Surgeon General Dr. Joseph K. Barnes and the Lincoln family physician Dr. Robert King Stone. The autopsy was so rushed—it took place five hours after the president expired—that there wasn't even a proper autopsy set available. One of the surgeons (it is unknown who) offered up his private surgical kit.¹³ Two men performed the prosection: Army Assistant Surgeons Edward Curtis and Joseph Janvier Woodward. The room was mostly silent as Curtis and Woodward went about their somber task. Despite four years of unimaginable bloodshed and hardship, this was the most difficult moment in the careers of all assembled. The only sounds were the scrape of saw blade teeth on bone, cascading water from the surgical sponge into the porcelain basin, and the occasional hushed remark.

In a letter to his mother, Curtis described the scene: “Stretched upon a rough framework of boards and covered only with sheets and towels, lay—cold and immovable—what but a few hours before was the soul of a great nation.”¹⁴

In the autopsy report, written to the surgeon general by Woodward, there are some telling details about the president's wound: “The eyelids and surrounding parts of the face were greatly ecchymosed* and the eyeballs somewhat protuberant from effusion of blood into the orbits . . . both orbital plates of the frontal bone were fractured and the fragments pushed upwards toward the brain . . . the orbits were gorged with blood.”¹⁵

The orbital plates of the frontal bone form, essentially, a vault in which the eye structure sits. When the vaults were broken by Booth's bullet, they more than likely pushed the eyes anterior, causing the protuberance Woodward reports. Modern postmortem reconstruction techniques could mitigate the issues caused by the broken orbital plates and return the eyeballs to their normal size. Additionally, modern specialty embalming fluids would be able to successfully bleach the purplish or black stains left by the ecchymosis, and cosmetics could cover the bleached areas.

Autopsy complete, Undertaker Sands sent for the embalmer.†

* Purple or black skin discoloration resulting in blood leaking from the capillaries. Unlike bruising, which is caused by mechanical injury, ecchymosis can be caused by disease.

† Like many facts surrounding Lincoln's assassination, there's debate over what occurred first, the embalming or the autopsy. While there's no clear answer, the author is choosing this version of events based on Dr. Stone's testimony at the trial for the conspirators.

Inexplicably, Cattell, now twenty-six years old and bearing some practical experience, was sent *alone* to the White House to embalm the leader of the nation without, as he stated in an interview with the *Washington Evening Star*, “even an assistant” despite the fact Dr. Charles Brown, an accomplished embalmer and namesake of the firm, was present in the office when the courier arrived with the summons.¹⁶

Cattell, working methodically, made an incision in the president’s thigh and likely used a hand pump to inject an embalming solution of zinc chloride.¹⁷ Zinc chloride has many modern commercial applications, but historically it was used as a disinfectant. Probably unknown to Cattell was how lethal to the living this concoction was. Even short-term exposure can cause ARDS—adult respiratory distress syndrome—which is treated by modern medicine with intubation.¹⁸

The method of injection by hand pump* was common at the time. A hose attached the container with the embalming solution to a hand pump. Another hose attached to the container terminated with a metal cannula—or thin tube—inserted into the vessel. The embalmer pushed the plunger on the hand pump to create pressure in the container and move the embalming solution into the circulatory system, simultaneously forcing blood out of the veins, Cattell choosing to drain from the jugular.†

Lincoln’s body “hardened like a marble.”¹⁹ This may have been unintentional. The desired outcome of embalming is some firming of the tissues, but too much preservative will lead to over-firming of the tissues and accompanying discolorations.‡

Cattell may have miscalculated the solution concentration, which was made by dissolving zinc strips in hydrochloric acid. The *New York Times* later reported on the president’s appearance: “The color is leaden, almost brown.”²⁰ In an interview for the *Cincinnati Enquirer* twenty years after Lincoln’s death, an unnamed undertaker, who, based on his comments, clearly had viewed the body, said the president’s face appeared to have “been injured by gun powder,” which was most likely caused by the dehydrating effects of a too-strong embalming solution.²¹

* As was injection by bulb syringe, a method where the embalmer squeezed a rubber bulb to move the fluid into the circulatory system.

† The right jugular vein is still the favored drainage site for embalmers.

‡ “Embalmer’s gray” is the resultant discoloration when too much formaldehyde is used. Cattell wasn’t using formaldehyde, as it hadn’t yet been positively identified.